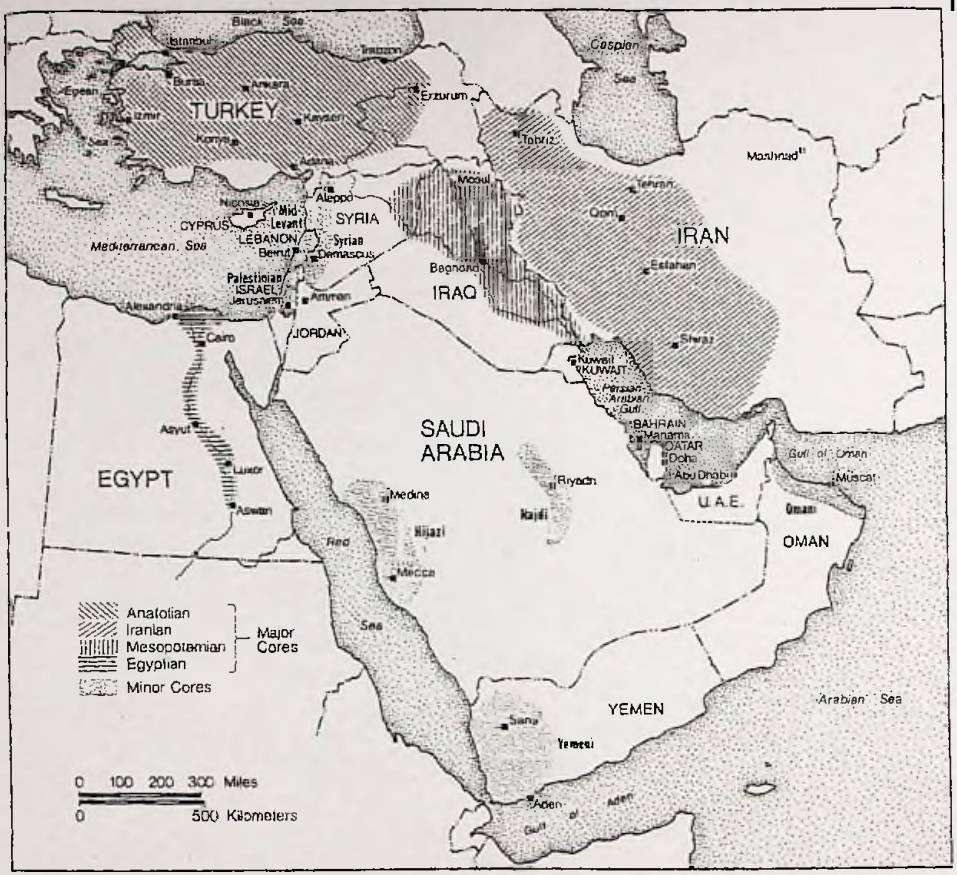
Redrawing the Middle East map



MAP 3–6 Middle East power cores, or foci. Each of the four main power centers has controlled most of the Middle East at some time, but none has controlled all other cores simultaneously.

greatness, Egypt gradually eased away from direct Ottoman control during the early nineteenth century and had passed under British protection by World War I. The interior of the Arabian Peninsula escaped Ottoman control and remained tribally fragmented until the 1930s, when most of the peninsula was unified as Saudi Arabia.

SOME INFERENCES: POWER CORES

The foregoing review of the evolution of political-geographical patterns of the Middle East reveals several broad, persistent factors. Significant lessons to be drawn from the review are relevant not only as a basis for the rest of this book, and thus for better understanding the Middle East, but also as parameters for formulating practical foreign policies in the region.

1. Four major power foci, or cores, and two minor ones have appeared and reappeared in the Middle East throughout history: The Anatolian Plateau (Asia Minor), Iranian Plateau, Tigris-Euphrates Basin (Mesopotamia), and Nile Valley are the four major cores, and the western Fertile Crescent and central and western Arabian Peninsula are the two minor cores. Lesser centers of strength have been the Yemen and Oman areas (Map 3–6).[22]

2. The two most persistently powerful foci, and the two from which the most extensive geographical areas have usually been controlled, have been the two intermontane plateaus, Anatolia and Iran. These two mountain-rimmed centers now host two of the three most populous states—which are also among the most powerful states—in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, and Egypt.

3. No one power has ever succeeded in conquering and occupying the entire core Middle East as the region is defined in Chapter 1. Regardless of the extent of the existing imperial power during any given period, some other part of the region maintained its independence.

4. The one area that has always been able to maintain its independence, or at least its separateness, from outside powers is the interior of the Arabian Peninsula (Najd). The peninsula was a center of imperial territorial control during the middle of the seventh century, but otherwise it has been relatively isolated, except as a source of migrants who appeared in Syria and Mesopotamia between 2500 BCE and 700 CE.

5. Although Mesopotamia was the earliest power focus and remained the main core for 1,700 years, it gradually weakened as a separate center and later functioned as a focus of power only when connected to the Iranian Plateau center. Under the sovereignty of Iraq, Mesopotamia demonstrated renewed potency beginning in the 1980s.

6. The political-geographical history of the Middle East has, to a great extent, revolved around the cyclic interaction of the powers occupying Asia Minor and the Iranian Plateau. Each power often sought control of Mesopotamia, which was sometimes used as a springboard against the power on the other side of the basin.

7. Powers centered in the three northern foci have controlled the Nile Valley at various times, but never has the Nile Valley power controlled any one of the three major northern foci. Rather, sustained Egyptian control outside Egypt has been limited to the western limb of the Fertile Crescent (Syria-Palestine realm) plus some brief inroads into southeastern Anatolia by Egyptian forces in the 1830s.

Neither history nor geography can dictate the future. Changing technology, fervent ideologies, outside influences, or other developments might alter the relative significance of the several power foci in the Middle East. Since the 1950s, the emergence of Israel and the rise of the Middle East's petroleum age have unquestionably reorchestrated political, military, and economic interrelationships. Yet to consider historical and geographical factors in the region's role as mere academic curiosities is to misread vital lessons and to risk repetition of the mistakes of the past. The roles of the centers at the present time are revisited in Chapter 8, which examines contemporary Middle Eastern political-geographical development.

NOTES

1. Whittlesey 1929.

2. Whalen and Pease 1992. In line with these discoveries, a humanoid jawbone was found in 1991 near Tbilisi, Georgia, that was dated to 900,000 years ago. Another dating gave the bone an age of 1.6 million years. *New York Times,* Feb. 3, 1992.

3. See Redman 1978. Recent additional evidence is given in Heun et al. 1997 and is covered in the *New York Times,* Nov. 18, 1997.

4. A *tell* is termed a *tepe* or *chega* in Persian, *hüyük* in Turkish, and *kom* in Egyptian usage.

5. The Wendorf team found evidence that indicated, through laboratory dating, much earlier cultivation in the Nile Valley. See Wendorf and Schild 1980.

6. See Schmandt-Bessarat 1978 and other articles by her. See also the readable but scholarly Redman 1978, with its attention to environmental factors; Robinson 1995, 8–13 and 58–87; and *New York Times,* Apr. 6, 1999.

7. See Redman 1978, along with Redman 1994; Burenhult 1993; and Saggs 1989.

Then Again. . .

Primary Source

Thomas Hobbes

Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an important philosopher and political theorist. His most important work, ***Leviathan****, was written in 1651.*

Chronologies

Western Civilization: Speculative Thought in the Modern Period

Western Europe: Absolute Monarchy

Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body and mind, as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself . . .

And as to the faculties of the mind . . . men are . . . [more] equal than unequal . . .

From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies, and in the way to their End, . . . endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another . . . If one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient Seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labor, but also of his life, or liberty . . .

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory.

The first maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, Reputation. The first use Violence to make themselves Masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their Persons, or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name.

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man . . . state of nature will return.

* * *

Hobbes describes "the state of nature," a theoretical model of life prior to the formation of the state.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of War, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea, no commodious Building, no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force, no Knowledge of the face of the Earth, no account of Time, no Arts, no Letters, no Society, and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short . . .

The Passions that incline men to Peace, are Fear of Death, Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them. And Reason suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement . . .

And because the condition of Man, (as hath been declared in the precedent Chapter) is a condition of Warre of everyone against everyone; in which case everyone is governed by his own Reason, and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; It followeth that, in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing–even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural Right of every man to everything endureth, there can be no security to any man, (how strong or wise soever he be) of living out the time, which Nature ordinarily alloweth men to live . . .

. . . If there be no Power erected, or not great enough for our security, every man will and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men . . .

The only way to erect . . . a Common Power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of [foreigners] and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the Earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly is, to confer all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will . . . and therein to submit their Wills, every one to his Will, and their judgments, to his judgment. This is more than Consent, or Concord; it is a real Unity of them all, in one and the same Person, made by Covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, *I Authorize and give up my Right of Governing myself to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorize all his Actions in like manner.* This done, the Multitude so united in one Person, is called a COMMONWEALTH . . . For by this Authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength ... conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutual [aid] against their enemies abroad. And in him consisteth the Essence of the Commonwealth; which (to define it) is *One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutual Covenants one with another, have made themselves everyone the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think*

Chapter 4

Asabiya in the Desert

Ibn Khaldun Discovers the Key to History

When Ibn Khaldun was 17 years old, the Black Death struck North Africa and carried away both his parents. His full name was Abd-ar-Rahman Abu Zaid ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun, and he was born in Tunis on May 27, 1332. He belonged to an aristocratic family of statesmen and scholars. Until the early thirteenth century, the Khalduns lived in Seville in Muslim Andalusia. When it became clear that Seville was about to fall to the Christian *reconquista*, they removed themselves and their wealth from Andalusia to the Maghreb, a region of northwest Africa (modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia). Born into extraordinary privilege, Ibn Khaldun led a life of high drama, amazing intellectual creativity, and swashbuckling adventure. During the second half of the 1300s, the Maghreb region was constantly in turmoil resulting from the struggle for supremacy between two dynasties, the Marinids and the Hafsids. Ibn Khaldun's career mirrored the unsettled times he lived in. He was entertained by kings in palaces and by rats in dungeon cells. Personal misfortune continued to dog him. In the winter of 1384, Ibn Khaldun's wife and five daughters, sailing from Tunis to join him in Cairo, were lost in a shipwreck. But Ibn Khaldun was not a man to resign himself to despair.

As a young scion of the prominent family, Ibn Khaldun was expected to enter the government service, which he did at the age of 20. However, instead of working for the ruler of his native Tunis, he moved to Fez and took up service with Sultan Abu Inan, the head of the Marinid State of Morocco. Unfortunately, in 1357, Abu Inan became suspicious of Ibn Khaldun's loyalty and threw him into prison, from which he was freed only a year and half later, when Abu Inan died. Ibn Khaldun served the next Marinid sultan for a while, and then emigrated to Granada, which was the last Muslim principality left in Spain at that time. In 1364, he was

put in charge of the diplomatic mission sent to Pedro the Cruel of Castile. The king was so impressed with the Tunisian that he offered to take Ibn Khaldun in his service and restore his ancestral property in Seville, but the philosopher turned him down. In 1365, Ibn Khaldun is back in the Maghreb, serving as prime minister in the court of Abu Abdallah, the new Hafsid ruler of Bougie. The next decade North Africa was torn apart as a result of conflict between the Marinids and Hafsids, and it is a miracle that Ibn Khaldun survived. When Abu Abdallah fell, Ibn Khaldun raised a large force of the desert Arabs and entered the service of the sultan of Tlemcen. However, a few years later, Tlemcen was also conquered by the Marinids, and Ibn Khaldun was captured by the forces of the new Marinid Sultan Abd-al-Aziz. Fortunately, this time he spent only a night in captivity, and was allowed to retire to a monastery.

After many further vicissitudes and turns of fortune, Ibn Khaldun left the Maghreb on pilgrimage to Mecca. By that time, his fame as a scholar was widespread, so when he was passing through Cairo, the ruler of Egypt offered him a chief justice position, which Ibn Khaldun accepted. He lived most of the rest of his life in Cairo, except for some travel to complete the Hajj, and trips to Jerusalem and other cities in Palestine and Syria. In 1400, he was in Damascus when the city was placed under siege by the Central Asian empire builder Timur (Tamerlane). Timur was eager to meet with Ibn Khaldun, the famous thinker who understood the inner workings of societies. Ibn Khaldun was soon lowered in a large basket from the wall of the besieged city. He spent seven weeks in Timur's camp, where he gave a series of lectures on the theory of history to the famous tyrant.

THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER OF THE Roman Empire extended from the province of Mauritania Tingitana (modern Morocco) in the west to Palestine and Syria in the east. The location of this frontier was determined almost entirely by environmental influences. Nonirrigated agriculture in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula requires a minimum of 25 centimeters (10 inches) of rain annually, and the Roman frontier followed almost exactly the transitional line between areas where agriculture is possible and the desert. The only exception to this rule was Egypt, where the Roman territory cut deep into the desert thanks to the Nile.

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The "barbarian" people south of the frontier were the Berbers of North Africa and the Arabs of the Middle East. Incidentally, the origin of the word *Berber* is the same as *barbarian* (because to the Greeks and Romans, the incomprehensible languages of these aliens sounded like "bar-bar-bar"). During the post-Roman period, these *Bedouins* (from Arabic "desert dwellers") built a number of empires, of which the most spectacular was, without any doubt, the caliphate of the Arabs. The Berbers provided the manpower for the Islamic conquest of Spain, and also founded the Fatimid, Almoravid, and Almohad empires, as well as a host of smaller states.

Chapter 3 examined agrarian societies that derived their subsistence from growing crops. But what if wealth comes not from a field of wheat, but from a factory, or a herd of camels? How does the economic infrastructure influence the character of empire building? The best authority to ask regarding the nomadic pastoralist life is Ibn Khaldun, a practical politician and a theoretical sociologist, the author of a remarkable theory of group solidarity that explained the rise and fall of states.

The concept of collective solidarity, or *asabiya* in Arabic, was Ibn Khaldun's most important contribution to our understanding of human history. The theory is described in his monumental *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History.* Asabiya of a group is the ability of its members to stick together, to cooperate; it allows a group to protect itself against the enemies, and to impose its will on others. A group with high asabiya will generally win when pitched against a group of lesser asabiya. Moreover, "royal authority and general dynastic power are attained only through a group and asabiya. This is because aggressive and defensive strength is obtained only through ... mutual affection and willingness to fight and die for each other." In other words, a state can be organized only around a core group with high asabiya. By acting in a solidary fashion, the members of the core group impose their collective will on other constituents of the state and thus prevent the state from falling apart.

But it is not enough to identify group solidarity as the main factor responsible for the strength of the state. Why do some groups have it in abundance, whereas others do not? Ibn Khaldun's theory provides an explanation. It focuses specifically on the situation in the Maghreb, but its genius lies in how well it translates across time and space.

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As a result of the distribution of rainfall, which was discussed previously, the Maghreb is divided by an environmental frontier into two zones. In the north, there is a band of territory, running along the Mediterranean shore, where rain is sufficient for agriculture. This zone (which was part of the Roman Empire) is where all cities and towns of North Africa are found. It was also where all states and empires were located. Ibn Khaldun referred to it as "civilization." South of the civilization zone lies the semi-desert and desert inhabited by the Bedouin tribes. This distinction between the "civilized" (we would now say urbanized) and Bedouin societies is absolutely crucial for the theory of Ibn Khaldun.

In the desert, each tribe can rely only on itself for survival against the harsh environment and depredations of other tribes. Ibn Khaldun stressed that "only tribes held together by asabiya can live in the desert." A kind of natural-selection mechanism operates in the desert that eliminates any tribe that lacks internal solidarity. By contrast, cities are defended by walls against the external enemies, and internal peace is imposed by the state. As a result, unlike in the desert, no constant struggle occurs for survival within the civilization zone that would nurture and maintain high asabiya.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 2, the life of a nomadic pastoralist provides a much better martial training. A shoe maker in the city who spends hours every day hunched over his work will make a lousy warrior—weak, clumsy, and nearsighted. Therefore, any Bedouin is a better warrior than your average city slicker. When you add to this individual superiority the high group solidarity of the desert dwellers, their military advantage becomes overwhelming.

The civilization zone is divided into states and empires, which are, in any case, normally quite good at defending themselves against nonstate societies. For one thing, the civilization supports much greater population densities than the desert, so the civilized armies tend to be larger than the "barbarian" ones. Civilizations also have technological advantages, such as fortifications, catapults, better arms, and armor. As long as the state keeps its internal cohesion, it is capable of defending itself against the nomads. (There are exceptions—nobody could stand against the Mongols of Chinggis Khan.) When the state loses its unity and falls into civil strife, however, it immediately becomes easy prey for Bedouins.

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Ibn Khaldun noticed that political dynamics in the Maghreb tend to move in cycles. When a state in the civilization zone falls into internal strife, it becomes vulnerable to conquest from the desert. Sooner or later, a coalition of Bedouin tribes is organized around one group with a particularly high asabiya. When this coalition conquers the civilization zone, it founds a new state there. The leading group establishes the ruling dynasty, while other Bedouins become the ruling class—the new aristocracy.

The members of the conquering generation and even their children preserve their desert ways. They keep their military skills honed, and, most importantly, their group solidarity high. As generations succeed generations, however, the conditions of the civilized life begin to erode the high asabiya of the former Bedouins. Generally speaking, by the fourth generation the descendants of the founders become indistinguishable from their city-dweller subjects. At this point, the dynasty goes into a permanent decline. It can persist in the "degenerate" state for a few more generations, but sooner or later another Bedouin coalition arises in the desert, and the cycle repeats itself. The members of the degenerated dynasty are dispossessed of their wealth, some killed, and others driven into exile.

An important element of Ibn Khaldun's theory is the corrosive effect of "luxury" on group solidarity. He argues that as the former tribesmen forget the rude ways of the desert, and become accustomed to the new luxurious life, they somehow become "enervated." This aspect is actually the weakest component of the theory. It is not clear at all why "luxury" should be detrimental to the military effectiveness of a group. Such "luxurious" habits as good food, sound shelter from the elements, and bathing should promote good health, and thus have a positive effect on military prowess. Even obvious "excesses," such as immoderate drinking and feasting, did not seem to impair the military effectiveness of, for example, barbarian Franks or the later Vikings. On the contrary, collective feasting creates the feeling of camaraderie that strengthens group cohesion. Ancient writers frequently inveighed against the supposedly enervating effect of luxury. But it does not seem to be good sociology. Interestingly, Ibn Khaldun, who also devotes a lot of space to this theme, nevertheless hedges his message. He says, "luxury will at first give additional strength to a dynasty. The reason for this is that a tribe that has acquired royal authority and luxury is prolific and produces many children, so that the community grows. Thus,

the group grows. Furthermore, a great number of clients and followers is acquired. The new generation grows up in a climate of prosperity and luxury." Luxury begins to play a negative role only "when the first and second generations are gone, and the dynasty starts to become senile." Ibn Khaldun's explanation of how the ruling dynasty loses its asabiya is weak, because he relies too much on inappropriate biological analogies: "Dynasties have a natural span like individuals." We need to do better to explain the process of social dissolution, but this is a large task, and I do not fully develop my explanation until Part II.

The last element of Ibn Khaldun's theory that will be useful to us is the role of religion. Ibn Khaldun points out that religion gives a dynasty another power in addition to that of asabiya. It "does away with mutual jealousy and envy among people who share in an asabiya." When people are united by religion, "nothing can withstand them, because their outlook is one and their object is one of common accord. They are willing to die for their objective." Although Ibn Khaldun does not say it directly, it seems that the religious feeling is a sort of asabiya, but one that can unite broader groups than tribal-level asabiya. This is a very important insight, especially for the Bedouin societies of North Africa and Arabia, where religion played a particularly important role in empire building.

The insights from Ibn Khaldun's theory can help us to understand better the history of societies on Rome's desert frontier during the first millennium A.D.

DURING THE FIRST SIX CENTURIES AFTER the birth of Christ, the geopolitical configuration of the Middle East stayed relatively stable, with the political landscape dominated by two huge empires. In the west, the Mediterranean littoral (roughly, modern Israel, Lebanon, and Syria) was part of the Roman Empire and then of its successor, the Byzantine Empire. Until the early third century, the territory east of the Euphrates belonged to the Parthians; after that date, to the successor state of Sassanian Persia. Between the two imperial frontiers was wedged a huge area of dry steppe and desert, which extends south into the Arabian Peninsula. The northern part of this arid zone is called the Syrian desert, but there is no physical barrier between it and the Arabian desert to the south. The people who

inhabited this region then (and still do so now) were the Arabs. The main adaptation that allowed the Arabs to live in the desert was domestication of the camel and the invention of the camel riding saddle. Camels could survive and thrive in areas where sheep and goats could not. They provided their owners with milk, meat, leather, and wool. But their most important advantage over other domesticated animals was their ability to carry people and goods through waterless wastes of Syria and Arabia. The camel was the critical "technology" that allowed the Arabs to expand over the whole Syrian and Arabian deserts during the first millennium B.C.

Not all Arabs were nomadic pastoralists. Some made a living from long-distance trade. (Several lucrative caravan routes ran through the desert.) Others penetrated into the borderlands of the Roman and Persian empires, and switched to a semi-nomadic way of life, or even settled down to agriculture. (Agriculture was also practiced in the oases of the Arabian Peninsula.) Finally, a number of cities in the Fertile Crescent, such as Palmyra, Edessa, and Hira, were ruled by Arab dynasties that arose in the Ibn Khaldunian fashion.

Although sharing common language and culture, before Muhammad the Arabs were never politically unified. The desert was divided up among a multitude of tribes who continuously warred against each other. (Most of the warfare took the form of livestock raiding and counter-raiding.) The constant state of conflict served to keep tribal asabiya high, but also prevented the tribes from uniting into a powerful confederation. If left alone, the nomads would never unite, and the state of intertribal warfare could persist indefinitely. In fact, this is precisely what happened to Arabia after the Islamic conquest exploded the imperial frontiers away from it—the desert again fragmented into a multitude of warring tribes. During the first six centuries of the common era, however, the Bedouins were not left alone. Their society was powerfully molded by two imperial frontiers—the Roman-Byzantine in the northwest and the Parthian-Persian in the northeast (and southeast, when the Persians annexed southern Arabia). In addition, there was a third imperial power, the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum, which impinged on the Arabs during the sixth century when it conquered Yemen. In 570, the year when Muhammad was born, an Ethiopian army even made an unsuccessful attempt to conquer his hometown, Mecca. As a result, the Arabs were "squeezed" by empires from all directions.

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Imperial pressures took many of the same forms that we saw on the Rhine frontier. For example, using diplomacy and generous subsidies, the Byzantines engineered the rise of a powerful tribal confederation, the Ghassanids, on their Palestinian frontier (in the area corresponding, roughly, to the modern Jordan and Syria). The Ghassanid Kingdom protected the Byzantine frontier from desert raiders, and provided mounted auxiliary troops for the Byzantine-Persian wars. But the side effect, just as happened in northwest Europe, was to introduce into Arabia the political techniques for putting together and holding together a supra-tribal organization. Similar developments took place along the Euphrates, where Persians encouraged the formation of the frontier Lakhmid state with the capital in Hira. Another imperial influence was the demand for luxury trade generated by the affluent civilized societies. Two products of southern Arabia in particular were much in demand, frankincense and myrrh. Profits from the caravan trade could be taxed, generating cash—"the sinews of state," as the ancient Greeks were fond of saying. The final ingredient in the geopolitical matrix surrounding Arabia was that each of the neighboring empires possessed its own brand of monotheistic religion: Christianity for the Byzantines and Ethiopians, and Zoroastrianism for the Persians. Within Arabia, the influence of Judaism was strong. Many Arabs in Syria converted to Nestorian Christianity, and some tribes practiced Judaism, although many Bedouins during Muhammad's time still followed polytheistic tribal cults.

Similar to the Germans, the pre-Islamic Arab tribes had two kinds of leaders, military and religious. Different noble lineages specialized in one or the other function, but usually not both. The chiefs that ruled the Ghassanid tribal confederation on the Byzantine frontier were one example of an aristocratic warrior lineage. On the other hand, the Quraysh (to whom the future prophet of Islam Muhammad belonged) were a clan of religious leaders associated with the holy pre-Islamic shrine of Mecca. For a leader to become a powerful unifying force that would enable his followers to found an empire, he had to concentrate all forms of power—religious, military, and economic—in his hands. Both the Germanic and Arabic society eventually developed such leaders under the influence of frontier conditions. However, whereas in Germania the evolution took the

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route of investing the military chiefs with sacral legitimacy, in Arabia it was the religious leaders who acquired military power. The endpoint was the same, but the route taken there was culture-specific.

While the evolutionary processes slowly changed the Arab society, thus creating the conditions for their eruption from Arabia during the seventh century, the triggering event occurred during the decades around A.D. 600. During the second half of the sixth century, both the Byzantine and the Sassanian empires fell prey to secular disintegrative tendencies. Their aristocracies broke into factions, each following their own pretender for the throne. The resulting civil wars weakened both empires. To make matters worse, each empire meddled in the civil wars of the rival, adding international conflict to internal war. The whole area between Constantinople, Alexandria, and Ctesiphon (the Sassanian capital) was convulsed in a series of wars. Armies plundered their ways back and forth and cities were sacked, sometimes repeatedly. Lesser states, such as the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, also collapsed. Starting with the great epidemic of 540, the plague carried away at least a third of the agricultural and urban population of the area (but, as far as we know, the nomadic Arabs largely escaped its effects).

The chaotic conditions in the Middle East aided the rise of Islam in two ways. First, there was no powerful empire in the vicinity, practicing a forward frontier strategy, that would be able to squash the early Islamic movement led by Muhammad when it was still small and weak. A century before, it would have been easy for the Byzantines to send their clients Ghassanids to deal with the new dangerous cult in Medina. Although the Arabian Peninsula is huge, camel transport allowed desert armies to strike across distances of hundreds of miles. During their heyday, the Ghassanids conducted successful military operations against powerful tribes located 500 miles or more away. Second, when people are exposed to years and decades of chaos, they begin to yearn for stability. Any message of hope, even if it only offers a better afterlife, becomes attractive. Monotheistic religions effectively address that deeply seated human need. The new monotheistic religion that was preached by Muhammad offered hope for this world also, so it is no surprise Muhammad was able to unify the tribes and stop their internecine fighting.

Islam seems to be a peculiarly attractive religion to societies that had recently experienced chaos and calamity. This quality of Islam continues to aid its spread even today. Ten years after experiencing the horror of civil war and genocide, many Rwandans are turning to Islam. During the decade since 1995, the number of mosques in Rwanda doubled to 500, and the existing mosques cannot accommodate all those who want to pray—many faithful have to spread their prayer mats on the dirt outside the mosques. It is estimated that 15 percent of the population now practices Islam.

It is a little known fact that Muhammad was just one (albeit the most successful) of at least half a dozen monotheistic prophets active in Arabia in the early seventh century. Naturally, the other five religious leaders are now considered "false prophets," because they lost out to Islam. But such a sudden appearance of comparable religious movements all over Arabia is indicative of sociopolitical conditions that were ripe for something such as Islam to happen.

As mentioned previously, Muhammad was a member of the tribe of Quraysh, who tended the polytheistic shrine in Mecca. During the sixth century, Mecca gradually became the center of the west-Arabian religio-political association. The Arab tribes journeyed to Mecca during truce months to worship at the shrine, and to conduct various kinds of business, such as trade deals or resolution of blood feuds. Mecca offered a neutral place where even enemies could meet without worrying about a sudden attack. As a result, Mecca became an important trading nexus, and the Quraysh derived a large part of their livelihood from trade. Note that there was not enough water at Mecca for agriculture.

We know the main events of Muhammad's life—divine revelation (in A.D. 610), emigration to Medina (622), the struggle with the Meccans and their capitulation (630), and the subjugation of the tribes of the Arabian peninsula just before Muhammad's death (632). But how did he manage to forge the tribes into an Islamic "meta-tribe"? The answer appears to lie in the nature of Muhammad's religious message. The old polytheistic religion of the Arabs was an integrative force only at the level of a tribe, but could not serve as the basis for a confederation of all tribes. Accepting the religion of any particular tribe would mean for the rest to subjugate themselves to the aristocracy of the lucky tribe, something that freedom-loving

nomads were extremely reluctant to do. Not that the tribesmen were particularly interested in proselytizing their brand of religion. After all, one of the main functions that it served was to distinguish "us" from "them." Islam, by contrast, was a new, monotheistic, and proselytizing religion. Converting to Islam meant submitting to God, rather than any particular earthly ruler. In fact, most flavors of Islam to this day retain their aversion to "kings." Because Islam was a monotheistic religion, submitting to a single God automatically united all Muslims into a single state with a single army. Finally, Islam welcomed converts from all tribes (and even from non-Arabs). It did not matter which tribe the convert belonged to, all were now brothers under a universal, unique God. An important part of Muhammad's message was that all Muslims belonged to one closely knit community, the *umma*. No one was excluded from the umma for reasons of social status or tribal origin. The universality of Islam marked a radical break with traditions of pre-Islamic pagan cults, and was crucial to its ultimate success.

The umma concept had a powerful grip on individual believers. Leaving umma was much more difficult than abandoning a tribal confederation put together for whatever materialistic reasons. Breaking with the Muslim community was apostasy. Not only was a Muslim required to kill an apostate, but the apostate also damned his or her very soul to burn in hell.

Thus, Muhammad was able to take a multitude of tribes, each internally solidary but unable to work together, and forge them into a metatribe, the umma. In the process, the former tribesmen, now Muslims, transferred their identity and allegiance to the new supra-tribal level of political organization. The new cohesion enabled the Muslims to prevail over their enemies. Between 622 and 630, when Muhammad was the ruler of only a small oasis community of Medina, the Muslims were much weaker than their chief enemies, the Meccans. For example, at the battle of the Trench (627), 10,000 Meccan troops confronted 3,000 Muslims. Muslims were also constantly suffering from the shortage of military equipment such as armor, and particularly horses for cavalry. Nevertheless, they prevailed, and in 630 Mecca capitulated and was annexed to Muhammad's incipient Islamic Empire. The Meccans lost because they confronted Muhammad with the typical loose tribal federation, made up

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of tribesmen with intense loyalty only to their own clan. As a result, a member tribe could decide not to join battle at a critical juncture, or even be bought over to the other side. By contrast, for Muslims tribal origin did not matter. Of paramount importance was belonging to the single Islamic commune, the umma. Toward the end of Muhammad's career, he could put a tribal cavalry unit under the command of a lieutenant, who was not a member of the tribe he commanded—something that was unthinkable in a traditional tribal confederation.

The remarkable discipline of the new Islamic army is illustrated by the last episode in the struggle between the Muslims and the Meccans. In 630, Muhammad unexpectedly appeared in front of Mecca with a large army. It was clear to the Meccans that they had a very little chance of resisting the Prophet. They attempted to negotiate, but Muhammad only promised the envoys that all those who stayed within their houses would be spared. On the next day, Muhammad's troops entered Mecca in four columns from all directions simultaneously. Only one column encountered resistance from some die-hard anti-Muhammad forces, which was speedily suppressed. Not a single house was broken into, and no Meccan was assaulted. Somebody stole the silver necklace of the sister of Abu Bakr (who later was to become the first caliph), but this happened because she left the house with her father to watch Muhammad's entrance into Mecca. No pillage occurred. Muhammad's order against entering Meccan houses was carried out to the letter. This degree of obedience is particularly remarkable given the origins of Muhammad's army—robbing strangers was always part of the Bedouin's lifestyle.

DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS OF his life (630–632), Muhammad expanded his political influence throughout Arabia. When Muhammad died, however, many Arab tribes rebelled against his successor, the first caliph Abu Bakr (in Arabic *khalifa* means "successor"). On his accession in 632, Abu Bakr could count on perhaps 6,000 committed Muslim troops. Although the tribal troops vastly outnumbered the Muslims, they were fragmented, and Abu Bakr was able to rapidly subdue all rebels. Such a quick success was, of course, taken as another proof that the new faith was genuine. However, the unification of the Arabian Peninsula created some unanticipated problems.

As far as we know, Abu Bakr originally intended only to unify all Arabs within the new faith, and did not plan any conquests of the great empires to the west and east. Therefore, he sent two armies to Syria and Iraq to spread Islam to the Arab communities inhabiting the frontier lands of the Byzantine and Persian empires. However, after all of the Arabs were brought within the Islamic community, they could no longer attack each other, and their military energies had to be directed elsewhere. Furthermore, the better pickings were to be found in not robbing other nomads, but in attacking the wealthy Byzantine and Persian cities. Thus, the Islamic unification of Arabia almost necessarily, without any intervention of human purpose, had to lead to an attempt at world conquest. The logic of the situation was such that the Arabs had to either conquer a great empire, or fragment back into the multitude of warring tribes. Speaking in terms of nonlinear dynamics, the unification of Arabia only was an unstable cusp from which the trajectory had to go either in one or the other direction.

The army sent to convert the Arabs of Iraq to Islam was led by Khalid ibn al-Walid, one of the best early Islamic military leaders, later called "the sword of Allah." He started from Medina in 633 with 2,000 troops. As he was traveling toward Iraq, however, his army was gradually increasing by absorbing tribal Bedouins, who accepted Islam. One of the participants of the conquest of Ubullah in southern Iraq later recounted: "Khalid ibn al-Walid with his cavalry attacked us, but we told him, 'We are Muslims!' So he left us in peace, and we went with him to Ubullah and conquered it." By the time Khalid reached Iraq, his army already had 10,000 warriors. The Persian governor of the Lower Euphrates, worried by the appearance of this great army, gathered his troops and advanced into the desert to bar Khalid's way. According to later chroniclers, Khalid sent a message to the Persians offering them to either become Muslim, or to keep their faith and pay tribute. "If not, blame yourself. I lead those who love death as you love life."

Khalid, traveling through waterless desert, had to take one of two routes, either going by the well of Al Casima, or by the well of Al Khafir. The Persian commander first blocked Khalid's route at Al Casima. Khalid, therefore, changed the direction and went to Al Khafir instead. The experienced Persian commander learned about this maneuver and got to

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Al Khafir first. Khalid's troops were in desperate straits—their horses were tired and, if they were not given water soon, they would perish. Throwing caution to the winds, Khalid left behind all of his baggage, dismounted his troops, and advanced against the enemy on foot. Fortunately for the Arabs, it rained, which allowed them to slake their thirst (and was taken as sign that Allah was with them). The resulting battle was extremely fierce, with the Arabs fighting as men who had nothing to lose. When Khalid killed their commander, the Persians ran, leaving all their baggage behind.

It is remarkable how many parallels there are between this battle and the battle of Sibir. A band of desperate warriors deep in the enemy territory prevails against overwhelming odds. But the similarities between Khalid's Arabs and Ermak's Cossacks run even deeper. Both groups were the product of life on a fault-line frontier and, as a result, enjoyed a preponderance of asabiya over their enemies. A crucial component of their asabiyas, the potent "glue" that made each group highly cohesive, was a powerful monotheistic religion.

THE SPECTACULAR ARABIC CONQUESTS OF the seventh century continue to cause wonder. Many explanations have been offered, but most of them do not make sense. The Arabs did not have a numeric or technological advantage over their adversaries; in fact, quite the reverse. The conquest of Byzantine Syria was accomplished with only about 24,000 men, whereas the Byzantine Empire had 10 times as many soldiers. The only technological advantage that the Arabs had was the camel, which gave them enhanced mobility in desert or semi-desert environments. Camels were used primarily as transportation; prior to the battle, the Arabs dismounted and then fought on foot. Early Islamic armies also suffered from the lack of horses. In fact, at the battle of Uhud (625), Muhammad had no cavalry of his own. Two years later, he had only 30 horsemen. The problem was that under arid conditions of the Arabian Peninsula, keeping and breeding horses was very expensive, and only wealthy people could afford it. The Arabs encountered similar problems in attempting to find enough armor. Only a fraction of warriors possessed chain mail. Early victories over the Byzantines and Sassanians were not accomplished by employing cavalry, either as mounted archers or by charging, as one might think. Instead, the

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Arabs fought on foot. The single advantage that the Arabs had was their fighting spirit and willingness to fight to the death.

The Arabs defeated the Byzantines and the Persians because the Arab asabiya was much greater than the asabiya of their opponents. Centuries of life squeezed between two imperial frontiers changed the Arab society in ways that made it possible for Muhammad to forge them into a unified powerful entity. By contrast, the Byzantine and Persian empires were going through decentralization phases right at the time when Muhammad was unifying the Arab tribes. For example, between 630 and 633, Persia saw seven emperors (shah-in-shahs) and one empress, none of whom managed to survive for more than half a year, and one just a few days. Success in war is a result of relative strengths of asabiyas of the opponents. A nation with high collective solidarity can lose many battles and still prevail in the end. This is what happened to the Romans during the Hannibalic wars (discussed in Chapter 6). Hannibal smashed one Roman army after another, but Rome always raised a new one. Romans lost one third of their population before they ground Hannibal up and won the war. By contrast, the Byzantines lost one major battle, and the whole of Palestine and Syria fell before the Arabs. Similarly, it took only one major defeat at Qadisiyya (637) for the Persians to surrender their capital, Ctesiphon, and all of Iraq to the Arabs.

THE WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE LIFE in the name of the faith has been one of the enduring strands in the history of Islam. One of the best-known examples is the Hashishim sect, which existed from the eighth century until its suppression by the Mongols. The name Hashishim ("Assassins"), actually was what their enemies called them, because they allegedly used drugs to indoctrinate sect members. Their own name for themselves was *fedayeen*, which in Arabic means "one who is ready to sacrifice life for the cause." The Hashishim were opposed to the Abbasid caliphs, whom they thought to be impious usurpers. They conducted a campaign of assassination directed mainly against the Sunni Muslim rulers (but they also murdered at least one crusader king in Jerusalem). Because the Hashishim disdained the use of poison or long-range weapons, and relied on the dagger, assassination attempts usually ended in the death of the assassin; these

Chapter 1

THE OTHER ISLAM

Who Are the Shia?

Every year on the tenth day of the holy month of Muharram, the first on the Islamic lunar calendar, Shia Muslims show a distinctive face of Islam, one that sees spirituality in passion and rituals rather than in law and the familiar practices that punctuate Muslim lives. Open spaces and narrow alleys in cities, towns, and villages take over from mosques and seminaries as Shias individually and collectively make a show of their piety and their identity. No observer of this day, the festival of Ashoura, will remain unaffected by the Shias' display of fealty to their faith. None will fail to see the uniqueness of Shia Islam or the values and spirituality that define it.

Every year on this day—whose date on the Western calendar changes from year to year because of differences between the Gregorian solar reckoning and the lunar months of the traditional Muslim calendar—the Shia mark the anniversary of the death of

their most vividly recalled saint, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad known among the Shia as the Imam Husayn. The day is called Ashoura, from the Arabic word for "tenth." It is an occasion for collective atonement through lamentation and self-flagellation. It is a distinctly Shia practice and has no parallel in Sunnism. In those areas of the Muslim world where Shias and Sunnis live side by side, Ashoura underscores Shia distinctiveness and often draws Sunni opprobrium. Ashoura is a day when the Shias announce who they are—often going to great extremes to do so—and when the Sunnis, by condemning and protesting, in equal measure may announce their objection to Shia practices.

When Ashoura falls on a warm day late in the spring, throngs of Shia women and children line the narrow byways of the old city of Lahore, a medieval village now surrounded by the sprawling bustle of modern urban Pakistan. Old Lahore's meandering streets (too small for cars), its antique villas with their high ceilings, graceful courtyards, and jutting verandas, and its ornate mosques and towering gates take a visitor back centuries, to the days when the Mughal emperors ruled these lands. On one side of the old city sits the grand Badshahi (Royal) Mosque. Arching gates mark each of the four main passages into the old city's humming bazaars. To the discerning eye of the knowing pedestrian, the old city reveals itself to be a Shia settlement, dotted with small shrines and places of worship dedicated to Imam Husayn.

Each quarter of the old city has its own Ashoura procession. They compete and converge as they wend their way through the streets, visiting every one of those mosques and places of worship. At the head of each procession marches a group of young men carrying a tall metal staff ornately decked with thin strips of red, green, and white cloth that flutter and snap in the breeze. High on the staff sits a triangular black pennant. Above it, at the very top, is the elab-

orately carved shape of a human hand. The hand represents the five holy people whom the Shia hold in highest regard: the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima al-Zahra, his son-in-law and cousin Ali, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn. The hand and the black flag mark Shia houses, mosques, and processions from India to the Middle East.

Young boys offer water to the watching crowd. Everyone drinks and says a prayer for the martyred Husayn. Behind the men carrying the staff comes a riderless white horse with a beautiful saddle on its back and white feathers on its drooping head. The horse is the center of attention. Its empty saddle reminds watchers of its fallen master, the object of the crowd's adulation. Several women, their heads covered with scarves, trail the horse, gently beating their chests and chanting "O Husayn!" They are praying for forgiveness, for on this day, the Shia believe, God answers prayers and forgives the repentant more readily than on any other day—regardless of either the nature and number of the sins committed or the penitent's degree of adherence to the daily practices that characterize Muslim piety.

Some of the women are weeping. The atmosphere is charged with anticipation. From around a bend in the street comes a rhythmic thudding interspersed with chanting. Then the bulk of the procession, a long line of men, heaves into view. Dressed in black, they walk four abreast and fill the narrow alleyway. Following the lead of an older, white-bearded man up front, they beat their chests with both hands as they chant and call in unison, "Ya Husayn!" As the procession passes, the sounds of the voices and the thumping echo from the old city's ancient walls.

The sights and sounds of Ashoura are gripping. This is a ritual filled with symbolism and passion. It is deeply spiritual and communal. It defines Shias and renews their bond to their faith and com-

munity. It reminds believers that the essence of their religion is not works but faith. With some local variations, the same ritual will be taking place on this day in the Indian city of Lucknow, the Iranian capital of Tehran, Karbala in southern Iraq, the island country of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and the town of Nabatiye in southern Lebanon. Ashoura is an act of piety, but not one that is recognized as an obligatory practice of the faith. It has no foundation in the Quran and was not practiced at the time of the Prophet. Yet this is also Islam, even if not in a guise that most Westerners readily associate with the religion.[1]

So what is Shiism? And what separates the Shia from the Sunni? Most Western discussions of Islamic matters or the Arab world tend to focus, often implicitly, on Sunnism. This is perhaps to be expected, since the overwhelming majority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims are Sunnis. Shias number from 130 million to 195 million people, or 10 to 15 percent of the total.[2] In the Islamic heartland, from Lebanon to Pakistan, however, there are roughly as many Shias as there are Sunnis, and around the economically and geostrategically sensitive rim of the Persian Gulf, Shias constitute 80 percent of the population.

The divide between Shiism and Sunnism is the most important in Islam. The two sects parted ways early in Muslim history, and each views itself as the original orthodoxy. Their split somewhat parallels the Protestant-Catholic difference in Western Christianity. Just as past intra-Christian conflicts shaped European politics, so the Sunni-Shia conflict continues to shape the history of the Islamic world and the broader Middle East.

Shiism and Sunnism not only understand Islamic history, theology, and law differently, but each breathes a distinct ethos of faith and piety that nurtures a particular temperament and a unique approach to the question of what it means to be Muslim. The rivalry

goes back to the early days of Islam and the succession crisis that followed the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. Most Muslims at the time (the forebears of the Sunnis) followed the tribal tradition according to which a council of elders would choose the most senior and respected elder to become the head of the Islamic community, or *umma*. Early Muslims found justification for this practice in the Prophet's declaration that "my community will never agree in error." For the Sunnis, the successor to the Prophet would need no exceptional spiritual qualities but would merely have to be an exemplary Muslim who could ably and virtuously direct the religious and political affairs of the community. The Sunnis chose Abu Bakr, the Prophet's close friend and father-in-law, as his successor or caliph. A small group of the Prophet's companions believed that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was more qualified for the job and that it had been the wish of the Prophet that he lead the Muslim community. In the end consensus prevailed and all dissenters, Ali included, accepted Abu Bakr's leadership.

Abu Bakr was succeeded by Umar, Uthman, and finally Ali. Sunnis call these four men, whose successive terms spanned the three decades from 632 to 661, the Rightly Guided, or *Rashidun*, Caliphs. They had all been close companions of the Prophet and were knowledgeable in matters of religion. For Sunnis, the time of these caliphs was Islam's golden age, an era when political authority continued to be informed by the pristine values of the faith and when Muslim society remained close to its spiritual roots.

Even the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, however, proved to be far from harmonious. Umar was killed by an Iranian prisoner of war, but most notably, Uthman was murdered in 656 by mutinous Muslim soldiers, his blood spilling onto the Quran that he was reading. The young Muslim community was in shock at the spectacle of Muslims murdering the successor to the Prophet. The aftereffects of

Uthman's murder plagued the caliphate of Ali. He faced mutinies—including one that included Abu Bakr's daughter and the Prophet's wife, Ayesha—and was hard-pressed to restore calm, and soon confronted a strong challenge from Uthman's cousin Muawiya, the governor of Damascus, who demanded that Ali avenge Uthman's murder. The tribal demand for justice soon took on the quality of a power struggle between the new caliph and the governor. A civil war between the caliph's army and Muawiya's forces ensued, further miring the Muslim community in conflict and confusion. That war ended only when Ali was assassinated by angry extremists who blamed both him and Muawiya for the crisis. Muawiya survived their wrath to assume the caliphate. The nearly century-long reign of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750) had begun, and Damascus would be its center.

Sunni Muslims accepted Muawiya's rise. He lacked religious authority, but he guaranteed the basic order that the faith was thought to need. Under the Umayyads the caliphs became both pope and caesar, delegating authority over religious matters to professional religious scholars and functionaries, the ulama. The Sunnis were well on their way to embracing their traditional stance of accepting a regime's legitimacy so long as it provided order, protected Islam, and left religious matters to the ulama.[3] The famous saying "Better sixty years of tyranny than a single day of civil strife" captures the spirit of the Sunni position.

Not all Muslims were content with this formula, and Shiism arose in part on the foundation of their dissent. Ali's murder, the transformation of the caliphate into a monarchy, and the de facto separation of religious and political authorities under the Umayyads led a minority of Muslims to argue that what had come to pass was the fruit not of God's mandate but of man's folly. They saw the roots of the problem going back to the choice of the first successor

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to the Prophet. Muslims had erred in choosing their leaders, and that error had mired their faith in violence and confusion. The dissenting voices rejected the legitimacy of the first three Rightly Guided Caliphs, arguing that God would not entrust his religion to ordinary mortals chosen by the vote of the community and that Muhammad's family—popularly known as the *ahl al-Bayt* (people of the household)—were the true leaders of the Muslim community, for the blood of the Prophet ran in their veins and they bore his charisma and the spiritual qualities that God had vested in him.[4] Abu Bakr and Umar were particularly at fault for ignoring the Prophet's wishes about how his authority should be handed on and convening a gathering at Saqifah Bani Saeda to elect his successor. This view would become foundational to Shiism.[5]

After a chaotic period, dissenters and foes of the Umayyads began to identify Ali, the Prophet's cousin, virtual adoptive son, and son-in-law, as the one who should have been the Prophet's successor all along. According to some accounts the first convert to Islam, while still in his teens, Ali was the hero of many of the early Muslim battles and was known for his chivalry and heroism, symbolized by his legendary forked-tongued sword (*zulfiqar*). In one tale, Ali risks death by sleeping in the Prophet's bed in order to fool assassins as Muhammad escapes from Mecca to Medina. Ali is the font of spirituality for the Shia.[6] They apostrophize Ali as "Lord of the Faithful" (*amir al-mu'minin*), "Lion of God" (*asadollah*), and "King of Men" (*shah-e mardan*). "There is no hero but Ali," they cry, "and no sword but his *zulfiqar*" (*La fata illa Ali, la saif illa zulfiqar*). It is common for Shias to invoke Ali's aid by saying *Ya Ali madad!* (O Ali, help me!)

The early Shias argued that the Prophet had chosen Ali as his successor and had made a testament to that effect, telling a congregation of Muslims at Ghadir Khumm, during his last pilgrimage to Mecca, that "whoever recognizes me as his master will recognize Ali

as his master." Ali was thus chosen by Muhammad's testament. The Festival of Ghadir Khumm, marking the date when the Prophet anointed Ali as his successor, is an important date on the Shia calendar. For Shias, the profession of faith is "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his Prophet, and Ali is the executor of God's will" (*la ilaha illalah, Muahammadan rasul allah wa Alian waliullah*). For Shias, therefore, Ali was always the rightful caliph.[7] Though he was eventually elected caliph, his partisans (literally, *Shiite-Ali*) believe that the initial usurpation of his right to rule by Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman gravely occluded the ideal Islamic authority.

The Shias disagree with the Sunnis not only over who should have succeeded the Prophet but also over the function that his successor was to play. Sunnis, whose familiar name is short for *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah* (people of tradition and consensus), believe that the Prophet's successor was succeeding only to his role as leader of the Islamic community and not to his special relationship with God or prophetic calling, and that the consensus of the Muslim community that selected Abu Bakr and the succeeding Rightly Guided Caliphs reflected the truth of the Islamic message. Underlying these views is the spiritually egalitarian notion—which in the West would be identified with the "low church" Protestant variant of Christianity—that all believers are capable of understanding religious truth in a way and to a degree that renders special intermediaries between man and God unnecessary.

Shiism is based on a more pessimistic assessment of human fallibility. Just as humans could not find salvation until the Prophet took up the task of guiding them toward it, so after him people need the help of exceptionally holy and divinely favored people in order to live in accord with the inner truths of religion.[8] The descendants of Ali, known collectively as the imams (not to be confused with ordinary prayer leaders in mosques) provide that continual help, renew-

ing and strengthening the bond between man and God. The ulama, or clergy, carry on the project of the imams in safeguarding and sustaining the faith. Without the right leadership, Shias insist, the true meaning and intent of Islam will be lost. The differences between Shias and Sunnis are thus not only political but also theological and even anthropological.

Shias believe that the Prophet possessed special spiritual qualities, was immaculate from sin (*ma'soum*), and could penetrate to the hidden meaning of religious teachings. Shias further believe that Ali and his descendants had these special spiritual qualities too. They bore the light of Muhammad (*nur-e Muhammadi*). They were his "trustees" (*wasi*) and were privy to his esoteric and religious knowledge. They could understand and interpret the inner meaning of Islam, as opposed to merely implementing its outward manifestations.[9] Since it was the Prophet's will for Ali to succeed him as caliph, loyalty to the Prophet has to mean refusing to accept any other outcome. The caliphate of the Sunnis encompassed far less of the prophetic function than the imamate of the Shias.

The Sunni conception of authority has centered on a preoccupation with order. Religion does not depend on the quality of political authority but only on its ability to help the faith survive and grow. Medieval Sunni jurists developed a theory of government according to which clerics would uphold the government's authority so long as the rulers provided stability and order and protected the Muslim community.[10] Sultans did not have to be spiritual leaders or pretend to create a perfect Islamic order. One might even say that their main job was to protect Islam's values and interests rather than realize its spiritual ideals. This distinguished the Sunni attitude toward power from that of the Shia, who denied such legitimacy to the caliphs and sultans.

By the ninth century of the Common Era, Sunni law had defined

the proper practice of the faith as the ulama and the caliphs established a balance between religious and political domains. The four Sunni jurisprudential schools—the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—differed in their methodologies and philosophies of law, but not on the larger issues that defined Sunnism. Sunni theology evolved around debates on the nature of God and the scope of rational explanation of the manifestations of his will.

Shiism took a different path. After Ali's death, the caliphate became the possession of dynasties—first the Umayyads and later the Abbasids. The Shia rejected the authority of the caliphs in Damascus and Baghdad and continued to argue that the rightful leaders of Islam could come only from the marriage between Ali and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. The Shias' insistence on the Prophet's progeny as the only legitimate holders of authority obviously posed a grave challenge to the caliphs. The resulting conflict profoundly shaped both Sunnism and Shiism.

The Shia view became crystallized at the siege and battle of Karbala in 680 C.E., when soldiers of the second Umayyad caliph, Yazid I, massacred Ali's son Husayn along with seventy-two of his companions and family members (that number has since symbolized martyrdom). Husayn's refusal to admit the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate had been a stance that he shared with the people of Kufa, Ali's capital. Many Kufans were liberated slaves and Persian prisoners of war who had risen in revolt against the distinctly Arab character of Umayyad rule. Since that time, this town near Najaf has had a special emotional resonance for Shias. In 2004, when the firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr symbolically moved from Baghdad to Kufa to deliver his sermons dressed in a white funeral shroud, he was signaling his resolve to sponsor an armed challenge to U.S., coalition, and Iraqi government authority.

Having decided to crush Husayn and the Kufan revolt by force,

Yazid sent an army of thousands to the area. They laid siege to 30
Husayn's caravan, whose male members (except for Husayn's ailing son, Ali) put up a valiant resistance. Among Shias, the gallantry of Husayn and his brother and standard-bearer Abbas are legendary. Dug in with their backs to a range of hills, Husayn and his men held off the Syrian army for six grueling days. Then the Umayyad general Shimr, a figure forever damned in Shia lore, managed to cut off Husayn's troops from their source of water, thereby forcing a fight in the open. Nerved by a courage born of desperation and a steadfast belief in the rightness of their cause, Husayn and his parched, outnumbered men bravely charged the much larger Umayyad army, only to be cut down and massacred. The fallen were beheaded; their bodies were left to rot in the scorching heat of the desert, and their heads were mounted on staffs to be paraded in Kufa before being sent to the caliph in Damascus. Husayn's body, along with those of his companions, was buried on the battlefield by local villagers. Shia legend has it that an artist drew Husayn's noble countenance as it awaited display at Yazid's court. That image of Husayn, in a majestic pose with arched eyebrows and piercing eyes, the Shia believe, is the same that adorns shop windows in Karbala and is carried in Shia processions. Egyptians claim that Husayn's head was buried in Cairo, where today the Sayyidina Husayn (Our Lord Husayn) Mosque stands at the mouth of the Khan Khalili bazaar.

Husayn's sister, Zaynab, accompanied her brother's head to Damascus. There she valiantly and successfully defended the life of the lone surviving male member of the family, Husayn's son, Ali, who would succeed his father as the fourth Shia imam, thereby ensuring the continuity of Shiism. Zaynab bore witness to Karbala and lived to tell the tale. That Husayn's heroism became legendary and gave form to Shiism is very much her doing: Shiism owes its existence to a woman. It celebrates the strong characters and brav-

ery of female figures in a way that has no parallel in Sunnism.[11] Women like Zaynab and her mother, Fatima, played major parts in Shia history and fill a role in Shia piety not unlike the one that the Virgin Mary plays in the popular devotionalism of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. Zaynab lived most of her life in Cairo, and a mosque popular with women sits where her home once stood. She is buried in Damascus; her shrine, the mosque of Sayyida Zaynab (Lady Zaynab), is a popular place for Shia pilgrims to visit.

As recounted by Zaynab, the bloody murder of the Prophet's grandson served to galvanize the Shia faith. Husayn had been the Prophet's favorite. The Shia recount the Prophet saying "I am of Husayn and Husayn is of me" not only to emphasize the gravity of Husayn's murder but to underscore that Husayn and his actions represented the Prophet's wishes. The brutality of the Umayyad army shocked the Muslim world at the time. Whatever people may have thought of the merits of Husayn's rebellion, the manner in which the progeny of the Prophet had been slaughtered repulsed many and underscored the tyranny of the caliph's rule. There were revolts and open displays of sorrow.

While Husayn's defeat ended prospects for a direct challenge to the Umayyad caliphate, it also made it easier for Shiism to gain ground as a form of moral resistance to the Umayyads and their demands.[12] Military defeat paved the way for a deeper appeal to Muslim consciousness. Shiism thus evolved not as a political sedition against Umayyad authority but as a moral and religious resistance to what that authority based itself upon and represented. The moral example of Husayn has throughout the ages resonated with many Sunnis, too.[13] For instance, the famous Indian Sufi saint Moin al-Din Chishti, a towering figure in the history of South Asian Islam, who now lies buried in the shrine of Ajmer in Rajasthan, wrote a poem in which he famously said that Husayn was a king (*shah*) and

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a protector of religion who "gave his head but not his hand to Yazid." Chishti's pithy homage to Husayn became so influential that to this day, those in South Asia who claim descent from Husayn are referred to with the honorific *shah*.

Husayn became not only Shiism's flag-bearer, symbolizing its claim to leadership of the Islamic world, but also a byword for chivalry and courage in the just cause of standing up to tyranny. Shiism is defined by its passion for Husayn, whose martyr's death is the dramatic experience that lies at the beating heart of Shia devotion. Husayn's death has left the Shia with a model of authority that differs from the one that the Sunnis commenced building at the start of the Umayyad period. For the Shia, Karbala is an emblem of suffering and solace but also connotes the refusal of true Muslim authority to be caged by pragmatic considerations and its willingness to challenge illegitimate authority—not only that of the caliphs but that of any ruler who does not measure up.[14] Shias have often invoked the Husayn story to define their conflicts in modern times: against the Shah's forces in Iran in 1979, against Israeli troops in southern Lebanon in the 1980s, and against Saddam Hussein's death squads in Iraq during the anti-Ba'thist intifada (uprising) that followed the first Gulf war in March 1991.

Shia identity manifests itself in many everyday modes besides the black pennant topped with an ornate carved hand. Devout Shia women generally wear black, as do the male religious leaders, who by tradition choose this color for their flowing robes. Shias hold their hands at their sides when praying—as opposed to Sunnis who clasp them—and are often recognizable by names derived from the proper names or titles of saints. Shias who trace their lineage to the imams carry the title *sayyid* (*seyyed* in Persian and *syed* in Urdu), which is

treated by Shias as a mark of nobility. Clerics who are *sayyids* wear a black turban. Ayatollah Khomeini was a *sayyid*, as is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the senior clerical leader among Iraqi Shias today.

But perhaps the most vivid distinction—and one that grates on Sunni sensibilities—is the love of visual imagery evident in Shia popular devotionalism. Sunnism tends to frown on the visual arts as possible inducements to, if not outright expressions of, idol worship. The piety of the Shia, by contrast, is steeped in visual representation. Although the Shia ulama do not condone the use of visual representations of the imams and even of the Prophet Muhammad, Shias hold them dear. Portraits of Ali and Husayn as well as depictions of the Karbala fight and other scenes from their lives adorn Shia homes and shops and are displayed in marches and festivals along with the ever-present colors of Shiism: black to express sorrow for Ali's fate, red to commemorate Husayn's martyrdom, and green to honor the Prophet's bloodline. Popular Shia artworks play much the same role that iconic images play in certain branches of Christianity. Puritanical Sunnis who condemn as un-Islamic any attempt to depict the Prophet visually or any veneration of images often cite the Shia taste for images as proof that Shiism is a form of deviance or even outright heresy.

Setting the Shia apart from the Sunni most emphatically, however, is the great feast of mourning, remembrance, and atonement that is Ashoura. From its earliest days, Shiism has been defined by the witness that it bears to the moral principles of Islam—a witness whose greatest public expression takes place in and through the rituals that remind the community of the special status of the imams. No ritual observance is more important in this regard than that associated with Husayn's death—the shaping event par excellence of Shiism. While there are indeed Shia approaches to Islamic theology and Islamic law, they developed alongside rituals.

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In the days of the British Raj in India, Ashoura was an important date on the calendar of colonial officials, who inevitably had to contend with Shia customs and procession routes that raised Sunni hackles and, at times, Hindu objections. Every year around the time of Ashoura, British gazettes and newspapers would sound alarm bells regarding potential breaches in imperial security. Rudyard Kipling, who lived in Lahore in the 1880s, watched many Ashouras firsthand in the old city and wrote about them in his gazettes.[15] These observations formed the basis of his 1888 short story on the intensity of communal violence, "On the City Wall," which was set during one Ashoura. He captured the spirit of the feast and the political passions that it could unleash in the following words:

> All the processions—there were two-and-twenty of them—were now well within the City walls. The drums were beating afresh, the crowd were howling *'Ya Hasan! Ya Hussain!'* and beating their breasts, the brass bands were playing their loudest, and at every corner where space allowed, Mohammedan preachers were telling the lamentable story of the death of the Martyrs. It was impossible to move except with the crowd, for the streets were not more than twenty feet wide . . . As the first *tazia*, a gorgeous erection, ten feet high, was borne aloft on the shoulders of a score of stout men into the semi-darkness of the Gully of the Horsemen, a brickbat crashed through its talc and tinsel sides . . . Then, without any warning, broke the storm . . . The *tazias* rocked like ships at sea, the long pole-torches dipped and rose round them . . . the fight became general. Half a mile away where the *tazias* were yet untouched the drums and the shrieks of *'Ya Hasan! Ya Hussain!'* continued, but not for long.[16]

Every year British administrators would brace themselves for fights and riots and negotiate Shia procession itineraries and rules

of conduct for each community. Today British administrators do much the same thing in Northern Ireland, when the late spring and summer "marching season" sees groups such as the Protestant Orange Lodge approach with demands to process through Catholic neighborhoods.

Ashoura's powerful focus on sorrow (*azadari*) and pageantry has a parallel in Catholic Lenten rituals, such as the Holy Week and Good Friday "Way of the Cross" processions and Passion plays that preface Easter Sunday observances in many places. Even the more extreme practices of some Shias, such as shedding one's own blood through a small cut on the scalp, resemble rituals such as those of the Penitentes, a lay Catholic brotherhood originally formed on the Iberian Peninsula. In rural southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, Penitentes hold special Holy Week reenactments of Christ's sufferings. They wear crowns of thorns and carry heavy crosses, and are even tied to the crosses and raised from the ground. Shias congregate in *husayniyas* (abodes of Husayn)—known as *imambaras* (courts of the imam) in South Asia—where they pray, chant, and lament Husayn's death. This too has a parallel in the Penitentes' *moradas* (places of worship), where they mark the sufferings of Christ.

Ashoura is a time of commemoration and penance for the vices and errors of humanity. The first Ashoura observance appears to have taken place in 684 C.E., four years after Husayn's death, when a group of penitents gathered at Karbala with blackened faces and torn garments. Every year since, the Shia have shown that they continue to share in the day's sorrow. Scholars have drawn attention to the resemblances between the rituals of Ashoura and pre-Islamic Iranian and Mesopotamian rites celebrating cosmic renewal, as well as rituals surrounding the death of Dionysus in Greek mythology and Osiris in Egyptian mythology.[17] The Shia's narrative of sorrow

and faith was similarly enacted in the perennial language of ancient civilizations.

Over the years and the miles, the Shia faithful have adapted Ashoura to variations in local culture. As a result, an observance at Lucknow, in northern India, looks quite different in some ways from one in Nabatiye, in southern Lebanon. In Iraq, hundreds of thousands walk long distances to Karbala, sometimes in scorching summer heat, much as Catholic pilgrims still march between the cathedrals of Notre Dame de Paris and Chartres in France. Ashoura in northern India reflects contact with Hindu symbols and festivals. Many of its practices, while recognizable to local Hindus, would seem strange in the eyes of Shias from the Middle East.

Elephants led the processions of the royal Ashouras in Lucknow in the nineteenth century, and the crowd carried large replicas of the grand Shia places of worship in Lucknow and Iraq on their shoulders for many hours. To this day, carrying these replicas is at the center of Ashoura ceremonies in Lucknow, a practice that brings to mind the festival of Corpus Christi in Cuzco in Peru in June, during which the local people carry large sixteenth-century images of saints, especially San Cristobal and the Virgin of Bethlehem, for several days in the rarified air of the high Andes. Just as the Corpus Christi is based on ancient Inca rituals, so Ashoura in Ladakh bears the mark of Buddhism, and in Awadh and Hyderabad reflects the influence of Hinduism.[18]

In Awadh in the nineteenth century, Hindus routinely participated in Ashoura. They adopted Husayn as the god of death, "his bloodstained horse and severed head lifted aloft on Umayyad staves presenting no less terrible an aspect than Kali Durga with her necklace of skulls."[19] Hindu influence shaped Ashoura rituals—for instance, extending the festival to ten days, the same as the festival of the goddess Durga. In Hyderabad, in southern India, it is custom-

ary for Hindu fakirs, with red streaks painted on their faces, and equipped with drums and whips, to walk in front of the main Ashoura procession. They flagellate themselves as they ask onlookers for alms in Imam Husayn's name. Incense sticks burn in urns, in the tradition of Hindu religious gatherings in congregations for prayers or the reading of dirges. Hindus come to these meetings dressed in the saffron color of their religion, which provides a sharp contrast to the black worn by Shias. Before leaving, the Hindu visitors stoop over the urns and rub the ash of the incense on their eyelids, paying homage to Imam Husayn and receiving his blessing in the ways of their religion.[20]

Other South Asian displays of devotion to Ali and the imams also bear the mark of Hinduism. Shias popularly engage in "miracle reading" (*mu'jizat khani*), a spiritual vow to read (and hence bring to life) a particular story from the lives of imams with the expectation that a desired favor will be granted. This practice may have its origins in the devotional Hindu tradition of *bhakti*. There ritual readings of particular stories, known as *vrats*, are associated with fasting and prayers (*pujas*).[21]

Ashoura has traditionally been about collective atonement, not about inflicting pain on the individual. Over time, Shia communities such as those of the Turkic Azeris of northwestern Iran or the Arabs in Lebanon and Iraq have gone beyond atoning for Husayn's death to joining him symbolically in his last stand at Karbala. To taste his martyrdom in some small way, some engage not only in the abovementioned scalp-cutting but also in self-flagellation. Shia religious authorities do not condone such painful practices—most have in fact forbidden them—though they have become staples of many Ashoura processions.

Ashoura is also a time of drama, when in Iran and the Arab world passion plays (*ta'ziyah*) act out scenes from the battle of

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Karbala, providing a dramatic visual backdrop to the commemorations.[22] The highly decorated *alams* carried at the head of each procession add to the spectacle. In larger towns and cities, various neighborhoods or guilds may each have their own processions, with unique chants and particular ways of performing the familiar rituals of the day. In South Asia every neighborhood has its own *alam*, and some families are entrusted with the custodianship of them, which becomes a badge of honor.

For Shias, the passion of Husayn carries a larger symbolic significance that is somewhat reminiscent of the meaning that Christ's passion has for Christians. In both cases, believers sadly commemorate the brutal slaying of an innocent and courageous spiritual figure, whose self-conscious sacrifice rises above the common run of events. This sacrifice reveals itself to the eyes of faith as an eternal decision that forms the conscience of and gives spiritual life to a sacred community that transcends space and time. For Sunnis, Karbala is history, albeit a dark chapter. For Shias, it is the beginning, the motif around which faith has been shaped. Karbala defines Shiism's ideals: dedication to the imams as an article of faith and commitment to pursuing justice in the face of tyranny.

Over the centuries, Shia identity and spirituality have grown up in the shadow of the Karbala narrative. Shia theologians argue that Husayn's martyrdom was the triumph of moral principles over brute force.[23] It was the supreme act of sacrifice by Husayn to seek martyrdom when he knew that pushing on to Kufa would lead to a confrontation that he could not militarily win. Yet Husayn was after a grander victory, a moral and spiritual one. The caliph's triumph was hollow, for it only served to rouse Muslim consciences to the sovereign claims of the truth represented by the Shia leaders, the descendants of Ali.

For Shias, Husayn's martyrdom is both a particular historical event, a historic turning point, and a metahistorical manifestation of the truth. Even before there was Islam or Husayn, Shia theologians say, the spiritual essence of Husayn's great deed existed as a timeless expression of divine grace. The Shia would in later years claim that Karbala and its significance had been known to all the prophets, as well as to Ali, who preceded Husayn.[24] Karbala is thus not merely one more massacre in the bloodstained annals of human wickedness, but a divine intervention meant to provide Muslims with a true spiritual signpost. Husayn willingly accepted oppression from the hand of a tyrant and embraced martyrdom as a divine favor, thereby transforming his suffering into a higher meaning and purpose.[25] It is for this reason that commemorating Karbala defines the Shias.

It is also for this reason that Shias place such a strong emphasis on their imams and the rituals associated with their deaths and are not content to limit themselves to the kind of law-governed and dutiful religious observance that forms the backbone of Sunni religiosity. Shias believe that to take part in Ashoura is to be absolved of sin, and that spirituality is to be found in the urgent drama of Husayn's martyrdom rather than in strict observance of pious duties or laws. As a popular Shia saying puts it, "A single tear shed for Husayn washes away a hundred sins." A tear shed on Ashoura is all the more rewarding. Whatever sins the Shias commit, they seek redemption in the grace and forgiveness of God and the blessing that flows from a renewal of their spiritual ties with Husayn and his progeny during Ashoura or at the resting places of their saints.

The rituals associated with Ashoura repeat themselves throughout the Shia calendar. First there is Arbaeen (or Chehelum in South Asia), which occurs forty days after Husayn's death; then the commemoration of Ali's death, which falls during Ramadan and on days

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of popular worship throughout the year when the faithful recite special prayers and sing devotional dirges known as *rowzehkahni* (*marsiya* in South Asia) that commemorate the sacrifice of Karbala. On Thursday nights and the twenty-nine nights of the fasting month of Ramadan, Shias recite the prayers attributed to their imams. One of the favored is the Prayer of the Day of Arafah, a long supplication by Imam Husayn during a pilgrimage to Mecca, which captures the essence of Shia piety:

Praise belongs to God
whose decree none may avert, and whose gift none may prevent . . .
O God, cause me to fear Thee as I were seeing Thee,
give me felicity through piety toward Thee
make me not wretched by disobedience toward Thee,
choose the best for me by Thy decree
and bless me by Thy determination
that I may love not the hastening of what Thou has delayed,
nor the delaying of what Thou hast hastened . . . [26]

In the end, however, what separates Shiism from Sunnism is not so much the divergences in practice as the spirit in which Islam is interpreted. First, whereas Sunnism took shape around belief in the writ of the majority and the legitimating power of communal consensus, Shias do not put much stock in majority opinion in matters of religion. Truth is vested not in the community of believers but in the virtuous leadership of the Prophet and his descendents. Whereas Sunnis have always placed greatest emphasis on the Islamic message, Shias have also underscored the importance of the vehicle for that message. Some have explained this difference by saying that Sunnis revere the Prophet because he relayed the Quran to Muslims, whereas Shias revere the Quran because the Prophet

relayed it. Although most Shias stop short of holding such a view, there is no doubt that more extreme Shias have subscribed to it, and that Shiism places great emphasis on the prophetic function in tandem with the Islamic message.

Second, Shias believe that faith has an outer (*zahir*) manifestation and an inner (*batin*) meaning. Religion consists of layers of truth leading to absolute Truth. The inner meaning of religion, its esoteric dimension, can be accessed only through interpretation (*ta'wil*), and that is the domain of the imams and those who are privy to esoteric knowledge. Shias believe that the Quran contains truths that come from the other world. Only the Prophet and the imams, who like Muhammad are blessed with special knowledge concerning the things of God, can interpret those truths. Whereas the explicit meaning of the Quran can be understood through commentaries (*tafsir*), its implicit and inner meaning can be understood only by interpretation. This emphasis on interpretation and inner truth has shaped Shia piety and made philosophy and theology central to their faith. The Shia have throughout the centuries justified their religious doctrines in terms of their esoteric reading of Islamic sources.

After Karbala, the Shia continued to challenge the caliphate, but they could never dislodge the Sunni dominance over the politics of the Islamic world. To the Sunni majority, they increasingly looked like an errant interpretation of Islam, mistakenly bestowing larger-than-life importance on the progeny of Ali and alien to the tribal sensibilities of Arabs and more reflective of Iranian and, some would argue, Yemeni attachments to heroes, saints, and charismatic individuals.

Sunni caliphs worried about the Shia less as a theological deviation than as a political threat. The notion of the Prophet's blood kin asserting their right to rule and standing up against monarchs always

had the potential to capture the popular imagination. The great caliph Mansour (d. 762) had to suspend the construction of Baghdad twice in order to put down Shia revolts. The fear that the Shia imams instilled in the caliphs resulted, not surprisingly, in persecution.

The Umayyad caliphs, and more so their successors, the Abbasids (750–1258), who ruled from Baghdad, imprisoned and killed Shia imams and encouraged Sunni ulama to define Sunni orthodoxy and contain the appeal of Shiism. By the tenth century Sunni jurists of the Hanbali school, known for their intolerance of Shiism, held sway over Baghdad, and fear of Shia revolts supported their penchant for purifying Islam. The last decades of that century witnessed anti-Shia violence in Baghdad and its environs—mosques and Ashouras were attacked, and Shias were even killed or burned alive. When in 971 C.E. Roman forces attacked the Abbasid domain, the first response of the caliph's forces and the angry and terrified Sunnis was to blame the Shia. Shia houses in al-Karkh (in today's Iraq)—which had become a refuge for Shias who escaped persecution in Baghdad—were torched as the attackers chanted, "You [Shias] are the cause of all evil." In a pattern of behavior that would be repeated throughout the centuries down to the present, the Shia bore the brunt of popular frustrations with the failures of Sunni rulers. Treated as the enemy within, they were the first to come under suspicion when there was an external threat to the ruling Sunni establishment. By the middle of the eleventh century, persecuting the Shia of al-Karkh had become a custom; every Saturday, Sunni mobs would show up at Shia mosques and shrines before looting the town, saying, "You blasphemers! Convert to Islam!"[27]

By the eleventh century these attitudes had also been canonized by Hanbali jurists, who condemned Shias as *rafidis*, or rejecters of the Truth. They said that Shias should not lead prayers or marry Sunnis, and that any meat that Shias slaughtered was not *halal* (per-

missible) for Sunni consumption. In short, the Shia were not to be treated as Muslims. After the Mongol sack of Baghdad and the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258, attacks on Shiism grew even sharper. Hanbali characterization has in recent history found a reflection in the extremist Sunnis' demonization of Shiism, which regards the faith as a heresy and a bigger threat to "true" Islam than Christianity and Judaism.

To survive, the Shia grew insular, often hiding their true faith through dissimulation (*taqqiya*), a practice that has a parallel in Judaism. The *dönme* community of Turkey descends from Iberian Jews who settled in the Ottoman empire and hid their identity behind Islamic practice. The sixth Shia imam made *taqqiya* obligatory for Shias to make sure the faith would survive. I remember a conversation a decade ago with a particularly anti-Shia Pashtun fundamentalist leader, who told me that his ancestry was actually Shia. His forebears had hidden their identity and pretended to be Sunni in public so long and so thoroughly that they had actually *become* Sunni.

The early sufferings of the Shia shaped their approach to religion. They revered their imams as specially blessed by God and immaculate from sin. The murders of these men only deepened the Shia rejection of Sunni authority and extended the emotional ties to the imams in the form of attachment to the shrines that grew up above their tombs. The Shia revere not only the holy group represented by the symbol of the carved hand but also the "Fourteen Immaculate from Sin" (*chahardah ma'sum*), which means Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve imams. They invoke these sanctified figures in prayer and commemorate the days of their births and deaths. Shias visit the burial grounds of their imams, and of important kin of the imams, such as Husayn's brother Abbas in Karbala and their sister, Zaynab, in Damascus. Titles such as *karbalaie* or *mashadi*,

meaning those who have visited the shrines of Karbala in Iraq or Mashad in eastern Iran, carry only slightly less weight than that of *hajji*, one who has made the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a blessing to be buried near the imams' great shrines. Shias believe that one who is buried in the shadow of a shrine will have a quicker passage to afterlife. No shrine is more blessed in this regard than the golden-domed Mosque of Ali in Najaf. Over the centuries the faithful have brought their loved ones' mortal remains from near and far to rest in Najaf. The enormous cemetery surrounding Ali's shrine, the Wadi al-Salaam (Valley of Peace), spreads for miles, thickly dotted with headstones and mausoleums.

Shias believe that their shrines are locations of spiritual grace (*baraka*), where God is present in a special way and most likely to answer cries for help. They seek blessings from these shrines and pray to saints to heal them and grant them their wishes. They believe that the shrines will imbue them with divine blessings and cleanse their souls. The shrines of the imams dot the landscape of Iraq, for that is where the Abbasid caliphs murdered so many of them. Along with Ali's tomb in Najaf, the major Shia shrines are those of Husayn in Karbala, of Musa al-Kazem (the seventh imam, d. 799) and Muhammad al-Taqi (the ninth imam, d. 835) in Baghdad, of Ali al-Naqi (the tenth imam, d. 868) and Hasan al-Askari (the eleventh imam, d. 872) in Samarra, of Ali al-Reza (the eighth imam, d. 818) in Mashad, and of Zaynab in Damascus. As pressed by Umayyad and Abbasid persecution, many members of the imams' families escaped to far-flung corners of Iran and as far as India to seek refuge, and so many more shrines emerged to serve as the pole of piety for local Shia communities.

In the nineteenth century, the Shia nawabs, or princes, of Awadh in northern India sought to reduce the burden of travel to Iraq by bringing the soil of the holy cities of Iraq (popularly known as the

atabat) to Lucknow. That soil was enshrined in that city's opulent *imambaras*, especially the Shah-e Najaf (King of Najaf) Imambara, which holds soil from Najaf. Thus did northern India too become host to places of pilgrimage.

As soon as Saddam Hussein's regime was crushed in the spring of 2003, tens of thousands of Iranians, many poor and elderly women with nothing more than a black cloth covering their heads and small bundles of food in their hands, walked across the Iran-Iraq border, traversed minefields, and made their way through the desolate landscape of southern Iraq to visit the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, which Saddam had for years barred to Iranian pilgrims. The shrine of Imam Reza at Mashad—which, like the Grotto of the Blessed Virgin at Lourdes, France, is famed as a place of sacred healing—draws an estimated 12 million visitors per year, which makes it the most popular pilgrimage site in the Muslim world except Mecca.

Shrine visits create transnational networks of people, charitable giving, and commerce. They provide Shias with a sense of community that goes beyond the merely local. A small brick at the shrine of Zaynab in Damascus bears the name of Sayyid Maratib Ali Hindi (the Indian). The brick was placed there in memory of the financial contribution that this Indian Shia merchant made to the restoration of the shrine. Today, as Maratib Ali's Indian and Pakistani coreligionists commingle with the throng of Iranian pilgrims to perform the same rituals at the shrine, they strengthen the transnational bonds of Shiism. Similarly, the beautiful tiles, mirrors, chandeliers, and carpets that grace the shrines of Najaf and Karbala have been gifts of Iranian kings, the Pahlavis included, who, along with Iranian and other merchants and pilgrims, have spent willingly on the burial places of their saints. The vast kitchens of these shrines feed the poor and rely on support from pilgrims who come to seek the saint's blessing and in turn seek to bring joy to his soul by giving food to the needy.

The sufferings of the imams lie at the heart of the Shia doctrine of martyrdom (*shahadat*). Just as early Christian saints accepted "the crown of martyrdom," steadfast in their faith and believing that their blood would be the seed of the church, so do Shias revere martyrdom. The imams died as witnesses to the faith, as did many of their followers. Husayn is popularly known as the Lord of the Martyrs (Sayyid al-Shuhada). Shias believe that martyrdom is the highest testament to faith, following the example of the imams, a deed that will gain the martyr entry into paradise just as it will strengthen Shiism. Sunnis historically frowned on this belief, but now the most extremist Sunnis seem to have embraced an especially grim version of it in the form of suicide bombing.

The Shias' historical experience is akin to those of Jews and Christians in that it is a millennium-long tale of martyrdom, persecution, and suffering. Sunnis, by contrast, are imbued with a sense that immediate worldly success should be theirs. Sunni Islam made huge strides as a force in the world very quickly. Within a generation after Prophet Muhammad, Arab tribal armies had exploded from their native peninsula to defeat three superpowers of the time, overrunning the Persian and Egyptian empires and pushing the Byzantines out of the Near East into Anatolia. Muslim armies continued to conquer, moving across North Africa, crossing the Straits of Gibraltar, (named after the Arab commander Tariq) to control the Iberian peninsula, and pushing north into Western Europe until the Franks stopped them at the Battle of Tours-Poitiers in 732 C.E. By the time the Abbasids rose to power, Islam stretched from the boundaries of India and Central Asia in the east to the Atlas Mountains and beyond in the west.

Given their history, the Shia would never associate their faith's validity with worldly success. The Sunnis, by contrast, became accustomed to celebrating their dominion in the world through the

muscular temporal institution of the caliphate. As a result, Shias seem to find it less threatening than the Sunnis do to come to terms with the relative decline of Muslim power in modern times, since for the Shia such a decline does not suggest a crisis of belief.

If Sunnism is about law and the "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots" of Islam, Shiism is about rituals, passion, and drama. Shias follow Islamic law with equal vigilance, but their piety is not defined by the law. Before there was Shia law there was Shia piety, which defines believers above and beyond the law. The current excessive legal-mindedness of Iran's ayatollahs is in some ways a "Sunnification" of Shiism—a reflection of the influence exerted in recent decades by Sunni fundamentalism, with its puritanism and intense political activism.

Of course, neither Shia nor Sunni beliefs and views of each other are monolithic. Symbolic of this is a small but important shrine on the beach in the wealthy neighborhood of Clifton in Karachi, popular with both Shias and Sunnis. The saint buried at the shrine is Abdol-Ghazi Sahab. Popular lore holds that he was a relative of the sixth Shia imam, Jafar al-Sadiq. Abdol-Ghazi fled from Abbasid Baghdad and sought protection in Sind from the local Hindu prince. For Karachi's Shias, he is a scion of the line of imams and a symbol of Shia life in Sind. For Sunni pilgrims who go to his shrine, he is simply a great saint. The shrine has for centuries brought Shias and Sunnis together around common beliefs and practices associated with popular Islam. It has fostered tolerance and comity.

Abdol-Ghazi's shrine is not unique in this regard. Others from the lines of the imams escaped from Umayyad and Abbasid rule to seek shelter in Hindu kingdoms, and their burial places are sacred to both Shias and Sunnis. In a corner of the courtyard of the shrine of Bibi Pakdaman in Lahore, where it is believed five women from the Prophet's family, including a daughter of Ali, are buried, a plaque

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marks the place where the great Sunni Indian Sufi saint, Sayyid Ali Hujwiri (d. 1071), once spent forty days in meditation. Such shrines symbolize a coming together of Shiism and Sunnism at a spiritual level and in the realm of popular piety.[28]

Sufism emerged among Sunnis as a powerful esoteric expression of the Islamic faith, resembling many aspects of Shia piety, as a balance to Sunni legalism and rational theology.[29] It is also prevalent among Shias, but it was among Sunnis that its concern with the inner meaning of the Islamic message found greatest expression.

Sufism and Shiism share much in ethos and temperament. Like the Shia, Sufis believe that there are outer and inner meanings to the Quran and the prophetic traditions and revere those whom they believe can grasp the more inward meaning. Much like the Shia imams, Sufi saints enjoy a special status that comes from their esoteric knowledge and their proximity to God. The spiritual essence of the saints, much like that of the imams, is a source of grace that continues to bless their followers even after the saints die. Sufi shrines, like those of the Shia, are places to which believers feel a deep sense of spiritual and emotional attachment. Among the Chishti order in South Asia or the Alawiya order in North Africa, visits to shrines are at the heart of piety. Even as Afghanistan labored under the lash of the Taliban's violent puritanism, many Afghans continued to visit shrines and practice the popular Muslim devotions associated with them.

Both the Shia imam and the Sufi saint are esteemed as special intermediaries between man and God, capable of interceding in order to secure divine healing, blessing, favor, and forgiveness, even for devotees whose daily religious habits may not have been the most diligent. In other words, Sufis accept the attitudes that define Shia piety—the very attitudes that some Sunnis have rejected as un-Islamic.

Last, Sufis share Shias' veneration of Ali and their love of the

Prophet's family. For most Sufis, Ali is a preeminent source of spiritual knowledge. He was the very first Sufi disciple and the source of the esoteric wisdom that Sufism is based on, and hence all Sufi orders save for the Naqshbandi, who trace their lineage to Abu Bakr, see Ali as the fountainhead of spiritual wisdom. (Many Naqshbandi Sufi leaders too have venerated Ali and accepted his special spiritual status.) Many of the qualities that are attributed to Ali, such as chivalry, bravery, generosity, justice, and grandeur of soul, are values that Sufis cherish as the true essence of Islamic piety. This tendency is strongest in Shia Sufism, the most important expression of which is the Nematollahi order prominent in Iran, whose doctrines weave Sufi spirituality into Shia piety.[30]

The influence of Sufism on Muslim life and thought has generated tolerance for Shiism in many Sunni societies. Where Sufism defines Islamic piety, Shias have found greater acceptance. In South Asia, for instance, the Brelwi school of Islam, which integrates Sufi teachings into Sunni theology and law, has always been more tolerant of the Shia. Both Sufism and Shiism have found much to fear from the kind of puritanical righteousness that Wahhabism (the puritanical interpretation of Islam that prevails in Saudi Arabia) and Salafism (a modern and at times violent manifestation of Wahhabism) promote.[31] Many of the forces that draw on hardline Sunni rejection of Shiism also aim harsh opposition at Sufism. In Iraq and Pakistan, the extremist forces that attack the Shia now also attack Sufis.[32] In many parts of the Muslim world today, the battle between Sufism on the one hand and Wahhabi or Salafist puritanism on the other vastly overshadows any struggle between Islamic traditionalism and modernism. Attitudes toward the two tend to ebb and flow along with puritanical tendencies inside Sunnism—the tugs between conceding to Sufism and folk Islam and asserting the claims of rigorous orthodoxy.

The two have come to make common cause in confronting their common adversary. Syria provides a modern example of cooperation between Shiism and Sufism. Facing a challenge from the fundamentalist party, Muslim Brotherhood, and its advocacy of puritanical Sunni fundamentalism, Syria's government, dominated by Alawis (an offshoot of Shiism whose beliefs deviate from Islamic orthodoxy and include elements of Christianity and pre-Islamic religions), has since the 1980s relied on the Naqshbandi Sufi order for legitimacy. Sheikh Ahmad Kaftarou, who died in 2004, was both the grand mufti of Syria and a prominent leader of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in the country. His successor as grand mufti, Sheikh Ahmad Badruddin Hassoun, is also a Naqshbandi Sufi. Kaftarou's order has provided backing against a Sunni fundamentalist challenge to a secular Alawi regime that recently has persuaded Lebanese and Iranian Shia religious authorities to declare the Alawis bonafide Shia Muslims. In Afghanistan, Chechnya, and the Balkans, wars of liberation were often begun by local Naqshbandi groups but were then hijacked by better-funded Saudi-backed groups of puritanical Sunnis. The Naqshbandi resistance to the puritanical Islam of Wahhabis and Salafis was especially evident during the Afghan war, as Naqshbandi forces fought for control of the country, first against various Saudi- and Pakistani-backed mujahideen groups such as Gulbidin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami (Islamic Party) and later against the Taliban.

Tamim Ansary, Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes. NY: Public Affairs, 2010, 272-277.

The Industrial Revolution could take place only where certain social preconditions existed, and in Europe at that time they happened to exist. The Industrial Revolution also had inevitable social consequences and in Europe, at that point, turning production over to machinery did change societies, daily life, and Europeans themselves. Let us count (some of) the ways:

- Rural areas emptied into exploding new cities.
- Animals vanished from daily life for most people.
- Clock and calendar time became more important than natural time markers such as the sun and the moon.
- Large family networks dissolved, and the nuclear family— one man, one woman, and their children— became the universally accepted default unit of the industrial age. • The connection between people and place weakened as new economic realities demanded mobility: people had to go where the work was, and suddenly the work could be anywhere.
- The connection between generations weakened, as most individuals no longer had any useful work skills to learn from their parents and little of value to pass on to their kids. The best parents could do for their children was to make sure they had the basic skills needed to flex, learn, and adapt. Thus, more broadly than ever before, reading, writing, and arithmetic became the indispensable skills of functional individuals.
- And finally, psychological adaptability— an ability to constantly relinquish old values and ideas and embrace new ones— became a competitive asset.

All these changes generated anxiety, but it was not catastrophic anxiety, because Europeans (and Americans even more) had already evolved a complex of attitudes enabling them to cope, and the core of this complex was individualism, an orientation that had taken centuries to develop in the West.

When Europeans came to the Islamic world, they brought along goods that were the end products of the Industrial Revolution, but not the evolutionary processes that made those goods possible. Muslims wanted the products, of course, as who wouldn't: the cheap cloth, the machine-made shoes, the packaged dried goods and whatnot, and saw no reason why they should not have them. They could buy and operate any machine the West could make. They could take the machines apart, study how they were built, and make similar machines themselves. Nothing in the manufacturing process lay beyond their comprehension.

But the social underpinnings were a different matter. The preconditions of industrialization could not be instantly imported. The social consequences could not be so easily absorbed in societies structured so differently from those of western Europe.

In the Ottoman world, for example, manufacturing had long been in the hands of guilds, which were interwoven with Sufi orders, which were interwoven with the machinery of the Ottoman state and society, which was interlinked with the fact that every person had numerous tribal affiliations, which was interwoven with a universal assumption that the public realm belonged exclusively to men and that women were properly kept sequestered in a private world, cut off from politics and production.

And yet, all across the world, in Europe as much as in the Islamic world, before industrialization, a great deal of manufacturing was actually in the hands of women, since almost everything of value was produced in or near the home. Women wove the cloth and made the garments. Women had a big role in animal husbandry. Women transformed the raw products of flocks and fields into useful products, and they practiced many other handicrafts as well. When these processes were mechanized, "cottage industries" went under and left countless women out of work.

In Europe, large numbers of these women then went to work in factories, shops, and eventually offices. Given the European social structure, they could do so: it caused some social and psychological disruption, to be sure, but women had already won access to the public realm, and so they could go to work outside the home, and they did, and out of this great movement, which was going to happen anyway, came the philosophical musings, political theorizing, and social activism known today as feminism, a movement premised on the existence and sanctity of individual rights. (Only after a concept of "the individual" exists can one say, "Every individual has rights" and once that assertion is accepted, one can entertain the notion that women might have the same rights as men, since both are individuals.) In the Islamic world, the pervasively embedded division of the world into a masculine public realm and a feminine private one made the move from cottage industries to industrial production much more problematic and produced social dislocations that were much more wrenching. It required, first of all, overturning that whole divided social system, which struck at the core of family life for every family and left unsettled questions of identity for both men and women at the deepest level of conscious and even subconscious life, as became most evident by the late twentieth century. But also, replacing guilds with factories meant severing the connection between manufacturing and Sufi orders, which at some level implied severing the connection between spirituality and work. What's more, moving production into factories required that people start living a life regulated by clocks; yet the fundamental core of Muslim life, the prayer ritual that must be performed five times daily, is situated in a framework of natural time markers: the position of the sun was what determined the times of prayer. Here, then, was another way in which industrialization pitted production against spiritual practice. (Europe would have faced the same contradiction had industrialization emerged in feudal times when events such as matins and vespers framed people's schedules.) Besides all this, industrialization required that a society organized universally as large networks of interconnected clans with tribal loyalties superseding most other affiliations rethink itself overnight as a universe of atomized individuals, each one making independent economic decisions based on rational self-interest and responsible only to a nuclear family. It wasn't going to happen; not easily. And it couldn't happen suddenly. It asserted a crosscurrent against the whole river of Islamic civilization since the 700s. Muslim societies needed time to let the social preconditions of industrialization evolve in their world. But that wasn't going to happen either; even less so. For one thing, no one thought in terms of developing "social preconditions." They thought in terms of acquiring products, technologies and their underlying scientific principles. That is, no one looking at machine-made consumer goods said, "Gee, we, too, should have a Reformation and develop a cult of individualism and then undergo a long period of letting reason erode the authority of

faith while developing political institutions that encourage free inquiry so that we can happen onto the ideas of modern science while at the same time evolving an economic system built on competition among private businesses so that when our science spawns new technologies we can jump on them and thus, in a few hundred years, quite independently of Europe, make these same sorts of goods ourselves." No, people said, "Nice goods, where can we get some?" Because it's pointless to reinvent the wheel when the wheel is already sitting on the shelf, priced to move. Marx and Engels, among others, documented that industrialization had some undesirable side effects in the West, but it caused even greater social and psychological disruption in the Islamic world. Yet the mere existence of industrially produced consumer goods made an argument that no pamphlet could refute and no religious harangue undercut. "We're nice stuff; you should get some," they whispered, triggering a widespread sense that something had to change, that people living in Iran or Afghanistan or Asia Minor or Egypt or Morocco had to become in some way . . . more Western. Thus, as awareness of the Industrial Revolution seeped through the Muslim world, secular reform ideas gained ground in Islamic countries.

In Iran, after the 1840s, an extremely energetic prime minister named Mirza Taqi, also called Amir Kabir, "the Great Leader," launched a crash program to "modernize" the country. By "modernize," he meant "industrialize," but he understood this to be a complicated process. He knew Iran couldn't just acquire industrial goods. To really match up to the Western powers devouring their country, Iranians had to acquire some aspects of Western culture. But what aspects? The key, Amir Kabir decided, was education.

He built a network of secular public schools across the country. Just outside Tehran, he established the university mentioned earlier, Dar al-Funun or "house of wisdom," where students could study foreign languages, science, technical subjects, and the history of Western cultures. Iran started sending students abroad, as well, to countries such as Germany and France. Not surprisingly, these students hailed largely from privileged urban families associated with the court and government bureacracy— not from rural peasant stock, merchant families, or high-status religious families. And so, the new educational program expanded social divisions that already existed in this society.

Graduates pouring out of the secular education system were tapped to staff a "modernized" government bureacracy and army. (Modern in this context meant "more like you would see in Europe.") Thus, the Iranian response to industrialism generated a new social class in Iran consisting of educated civil servants, army officers, university students, teachers, technicians, professionals, anyone who had graduated from Dar al-Funun, anyone who had studied in Europe. . . . This burgeoning class developed an ever more secular outlook and grew ever more receptive to thinking of Islam as a system of rational, ethical values rather than a revelation-based manual for getting into heaven. Constitutionalism, a second phenomenon born in Europe, now began to have an impact in Iran, largely because this new class was open to it.

Constitutionalism is not quite the same as democratic idealism, since even totalitarian dictatorships can have constitutions, but a constitution is certainly a necessary precondition to democracy. It asserts that a society operates within a stable framework of stated laws binding

ruler as well as ruled. Absolute monarchies, the system long in place throughout the Muslim world, gave rulers de facto power to decide the rules as they pleased at any given moment. It's important to realize that in absolute monarchies this pattern doesn't apply just to the top ruler; it is reified throughout society, each man having arbitrary power over those below him and subject to the arbitrary whims of those above. (Similarly, democracy doesn't just mean top leaders gaining office through election; it means that some sort of interactive participatory process goes on at every level: elections are not equivalent to democracy; they are only a sign that democracy exists.)

Tamim Ansary. *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes.* New York: Public Affairs, 272-277.

13

The Reform Movements

1150–1336 AH
1737–1918 CE

At the same time as these political developments, a crucial story was unfolding in the intellectual arena as well. This story began before 1800 and continued long after, with consequences that shake the world to this very day: it consisted of revival and reform movements that surged up throughout the Muslim world at the same time that Europeans were overwhelming these lands.

The two stories are related, though not identical. Some sort of sweeping challenge to the Muslim status quo was going to take place around this time with or without the Europeans. Why? Because in the Muslim world, by 1700 or so, religious institutions had bureaucratized spirituality in much the same way that the Catholic Church had bureaucratized Christianity in late medieval Europe. The whole system of Muslim law had been worked out so fully that there was no creative work left for any new enthusiast to do. The application of shari'a to every dot and detail of personal and social life was a done deal. The power of the ulama had grown encrusted. The Sufi orders had been institutionalized, and authorities at every level agreed that "the gates of ijtihad were closed."

Ijtihad, remember, means "free and independent thinking based on reason." It can't depart from scripture, but it consists of thinking through the implications of scripture creatively. Muslim scholars had once allowed that ijtihad might be exercised on issues not explicitly settled by Qur'an; then by Qur'an and hadith; then by Qur'an, hadith, and the work of previous authoritative scholars. . . . And so by the eighteenth century, important scholars generally agreed that no unsettled issues existed. Everything had been covered, everything worked out; ordinary people no longer needed to exercise free and independent thought. There was nothing left for them to do but follow the rules.

Following the rules, however, does not provide the spiritual fulfillment people seek from religion. The bureaucratization of Islam created much the same stultifications and discontents that in Christendom had provoked the Protestant Reformation. And indeed, by the middle of the eighteenth century, reform movements were beginning to sprout throughout the Muslim world.

But there never was a Muslim version of Europe's Protestant Reformation, and thus none of the consequences that followed from the Reformation: no doctrine of individualism emerged here, no coupling of religion to nationalism (except in a sense in Iran), no separation of church and state, no conceptual division of the world into secular and religious realms, no sudden development of enlightenment-style liberalism, and so no democratic, scientific, or industrial revolutions.

Why not?

Well, for one thing, some of the issues that fueled the Reformation could not arise in Islam. Protestant reformers rebelled against the Church; Islam had no church. Protestant reformers attacked the authority of the pope; Islam had no pope. Protestants said priests could not mediate between man and God; Islam never had a priesthood (the ulama were more like lawyers than priests.) The Protestant reformers insisted on a direct, personal interaction between the individual worshipper and God. The Muslim prayer ritual had always been just that.

But the Europeans were certainly a factor too. Without them in the picture, the Muslim reform movements might well have taken a different course. European religious reform took shape in a purely European context. That is, when Protestant reformers challenged Catholic practices and

doctrines, they were addressing issues internal to their own society, not steeling Christianity against some external cultural challenge. In 1517, few western Christians worried that Muslims might have a more convincing message to offer than Christianity or that Christian youth might start converting to Islam. The Turks were at the gate, it's true, but they weren't in the living room, and they certainly weren't in the bedroom. The Turks posed a threat to the physical health of Christians, but not to the spiritual health of Christianity.

Muslims were in a different boat. Almost from the start, as I've discussed, Islam had offered its political and military successes as an argument for its doctrines and a proof of its revelations. The process began with those iconic early battles at Badr and Uhud, when the outcome of battle was shown to have theological meaning. The miracle of expansion and the linkage of victory with truth continued for hundreds of years.

Then came the Mongol holocaust, which forced Muslim theologians to reexamine their assumptions. That process spawned such reformers as Ibn Taymiyah. Vis-à-vis the Mongols, however, the weakness of Muslims was concrete and easy to understand. The Mongols had greater killing power, but they came without an ideology. When the bloodshed wound down and the human hunger for meaning bubbled up, as it always does, they had nothing to offer. In fact, they themselves converted. Islam won in the end, absorbing the Mongols as it had absorbed the Turks before them and the Persians before that.

Conversion to Islam made the Mongols no less bloody (as Timur-i-lang proved), but at least, under the aegis of the converted rulers, the old quest could begin again, albeit starting over from the smoking rubble of a ruined world—the quest to build and universalize the community of Allah.

The same could not be said for the new overlords. The Europeans came wrapped in certainty about their way of life and peddling their own ideas of ultimate truth. They didn't challenge Islam so much as ignore it, unless they were missionaries, in which case they simply tried to convert the Muslims. If they noticed Islam, they didn't bother to debate it (missionaries are not in the debating business) but only smiled at it as one would at the toys of a child or the quaint relics of a more primitive people. How maddening for Muslim cognoscenti! And yet, what could Muslims do about it?

Even if Muslim and Christian scholars had found some forum in which to exchange views, it would have been irrelevant to the conundrum facing Muslims because by the nineteenth century, the challenge to Islam came not so much from Christianity as from a secular, humanistic worldview that evolved out of the Reformation, the mélange now often called "modernity."

The source of Muslim weakness and European strength was not obvious. It wasn't strictly a question of military advantage. For the most part, the foreigners weren't torturing and killing. For the most part, the new overlords didn't even set themselves up as rulers, quite. Officially, most Muslims still had their own native monarchs, still had their own government buildings where Muslim officials still stamped documents, and somewhere in every Muslim state was still a capital dating back to ancient days of bygone splendor, and in that capital was a palace and in that palace a throne and on that throne usually a shah, sultan, nawab, khan, khedive, or what you will, some native ruler whose wealth and pomp made him all but indistinguishable from the potentates of old.

In Iran, the foreigners roamed the corridors of power merely as advisers. In Turkey, there they were, collecting salaries as consultants. In Egypt and the Levant, they stood by as "protectors." Even in India, which had a governor-general appointed by the British parliament, the military and police forces that "kept order" consisted mostly of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsees, and other locals. How could Muslims claim that they were not still ruling themselves?

And yet by the end of the eighteenth century, Muslims looked around and saw with dawning horror that they had been conquered: from Bengal to Istanbul, they were subservient to foreigners in every aspect of their lives, in their own cities and towns and neighborhoods and in their very homes. And not just foreigners like the ones next door, but people who spoke a whole different set of languages, practiced different religious rituals, wore different kinds of clothes and different kinds of headgear (or, shockingly, none at all!), built different kinds of houses, formed different kinds of groupings. These foreigners ate pork, they drank liquor, their women moved about in public with their faces showing, they laughed at jokes that weren't funny and failed to see the humor in things that were hilarious, ate weird-tasting food, listened to music that sounded more like

noise, and spent their leisure time in puzzling and pointless activities such as cricket and quadrilles.

So the question arose now, as it had in the wake of the Mongol holocaust: if the triumphant expansion of the Muslim project proved the truth of the revelation, what did the impotence of Muslims in the face of these new foreigners signify about the faith?

With this question looming over the Muslim world, movements to revive Islam could not be extricated from the need to resurrect Muslim power. Reformers could not merely offer proposals for achieving more authentic religious experiences. They had to expound how the authenticity they proposed would get history back on course, how their proposals would restore the dignity and splendor of the Umma, how they would get Muslims moving again toward the proper endpoint of history: perfecting the community of justice and compassion that flourished in Medina in the original golden moment and enlarging it until it included all the world.

Many reformers emerged and many movements bubbled up, but all of them can be sorted into three general sorts of responses to the troubling question.

One response was to say that what needed changing was not Islam but Muslims. Innovations, alterations, and accretions had corrupted the faith so that no one was practicing true Islam anymore. What Muslims needed to do was to shut out Western influence and restore Islam to its pristine original form.

Another response was to say that the West was right. Muslims had gotten mired in obsolete religious ideas; they had ceded control of Islam to ignorant clerics who were out of touch with changing times; they needed to modernize their faith along Western lines by clearing out superstition, renouncing magical thinking, and rethinking Islam as an ethical system compatible with science and secular activities.

A third response was to declare Islam the true religion but concede that Muslims had certain things to learn from the West. In this view, Muslims needed to rediscover and strengthen the essence of their own faith, history and traditions, but absorb Western learning in the fields of science and technology. According to this river of reform, Muslims needed to modernize but could do so in a distinctively Muslim way: science was compatible with the Muslim faith and modernization did not have to mean Westernization.

These three answers to the challenge of modernity were well-embodied in three seminal reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Abdul Wahhab of the Arabian peninsula, Sayyid Ahmad of Aligarh, India, and Sayyid Jamaluddin-i-Afghan, whose birthplace is disputed and whose presence was felt everywhere. By no means were they the only reformers. Their ideas were not always mutually exclusive. They sometimes straddled two different currents of reformism. Their contemporaries and students often borrowed from each other. But still, these three men represent three distinctively different approaches to reforming and reviving Islam.

WAHHABISM

Abdul Wahhab was born around 1703 in the Nejd, that desert of yellow sand dunes that many of us picture reflexively when we think of Arabia. He grew up in a small oasis town, the son of a judge. When he showed promise as a Qur'anic student, he was sent to Medina for further schooling. There, one of his teachers introduced him to the works of Ibn Taymiyah, the austere Syrian theologian who, in the wake of the Mongol holocaust taught that God had abandoned Muslims and that Muslims must return to the exact ways of the First Community if they were ever to regain His favor. These teachings resonated for the young Wahhab.

From Medina the youngster made his way to the cosmopolitan city of Basra on the Persian Gulf, and what this ultimate country boy saw in Basra—the clamorous diversity of opinion, the many schools of thought, the numerous interpretations of the Holy Word, the crowds, the lights, the noise—appalled him. This, he decided, was the sort of excrescence that was making Islam weak.

He returned, then, to the stark simplicity of his hometown in the desert and began to preach religious revival through restoration of Islam to its original form. There was only one God, he thundered, and everyone must worship the one God exactly as instructed in the Holy Book. Everyone must obey the laws laid down by the revelations. Everyone must live exactly as the Pure Originals of Medina in Mohammed's time, and anyone who blocked the restoration of the original and holy community must be eliminated.

The Ottomans considered all of Arabia their possession, but they had no real authority among the small Bedouin tribes who inhabited this arid

landscape, living in scattered oases and eking out a thin survival as traders and herders. Wahhab attracted some followers among his fellow Bedouins, and he led his group around the countryside destroying shrines because they were objects of improper reverence, and Abdul Wahhab preached that reverence for anything or anyone except God was idolatry. Eventually, Wahhab achieved the position of judge and began to apply Hanbali law as he saw it with uncompromising zeal. One day, he had a well-known woman of the town stoned to death as an adulteress. The locals had seen enough. A mob gathered to demand that Abdul Wahhab be ousted from his post; there was even talk of lynching. Wahhab fled that town and made his way to another oasis called Dariyah.

There, the local ruler Mohammed ibn Saud welcomed him warmly. Ibn Saud was a minor tribal chieftain with very big ambitions: to "unite" the Arabian Peninsula. By "unite," of course, he meant "conquer." In the single-minded preacher Abdul Wahhab he saw just the ally he needed; Wahhab saw the same when he looked at Ibn Saud. The two men made a pact. The chieftain agreed to recognize Wahhab as the top religious authority of the Muslim community and do all he could to implement his vision; the preacher, for his part, agreed to recognize Ibn Saud as the political head of the Muslim community, its amir, and to instruct his followers to fight for him.

The pact produced fruit. Over the next few decades, these two men "united" all the bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula under Saudi-Wahhabi rule. Each time they confronted another recalcitrant tribe, they began by called on them to convert. "Convert! Convert! Convert!" they yelled three times. If the warning was ignored three times (as it generally was) Wahhab told the soldiers they could go ahead and kill the people they were confronting; Allah permitted it, because these were infidels.

The call to convert confused the tribes they were attacking at this point because all of these tribes considered themselves devout Muslims already. But when Abdul Wahhab said "Convert!" he meant to the vision of Islam he was preaching. He did not call it Wahhabism because, like Ibn Taymiyah before him, he maintained that he was simply calling Muslims back to pristine, original Islam, stripped of all accretions and washed of all corruptions. He was not an innovator; in fact, he was the anti-innovator.

People unconvinced of his views, however, saw his vision as a particular interpretation of Islam, not Islam itself; and they had no trouble labeling his ideology Wahhabism, a term that came into use even among some who endorsed his views.

In 1766, Ibn Saud was assassinated but his son Abdul Aziz took over and continued his father's campaign to unite Arabia under the banner of Abdul Wahhab's theology. Then in 1792, Wahhab himself died, leaving behind twenty widows and countless children. His life had spanned virtually the entire eighteenth century. While he was imposing his vision of pristine Islam in Arabia, England and Scotland melded into Great Britain, the United States of America was born, the French Revolution issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man, Mozart wrote his entire corpus of music, and James Watt invented the steam engine.

Upon Wahhab's death, Aziz ibn Saud declared himself his successor. Already the amir, the new Ibn Saud now anointed himself the chief religious authority as well. In 1802, Aziz ibn Saud attacked the city of Karbala, where the Prophet's grandson Hussein had been martyred. This city was central to Shi'i devotions, and many of them had gathered just then to commemorate Hussein's martyrdom. But Shi'is ranked high on Wahhab's list of those who had altered and corrupted pristine original Islam, and so, upon conquering the city, Aziz ibn Saud had some two thousand of its Shi'i inhabitants put to death.

In 1804, Aziz ibn Saud conquered Medina, where he had his army promptly destroy the tombs of Mohammed's companions. From Medina, the Saudi-Wahhabi armies went on to Mecca, where they wrecked a shrine that supposedly marked Prophet Mohammed's birthplace (so that no one would fall into idolatrous worship of Mohammed). As long as he was in the city, Ibn Saud took advantage of the opportunity to humbly perform the rites of pilgrimage in the Ka'ba.

Then in 1811, the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance began to organize a new campaign, this time to Asia Minor, the heart of the Ottoman Empire. Now at last the sultan took notice of the Wahhabi movement. To grapple with these surging Bedouins, he called on Mohammed Ali, khedive of Egypt, to help him out. Mohammed Ali took his disciplined modern army into Arabia, and in 1815—the same year that Napoleon's career was ending at Waterloo—he crushed Ibn Saud, restored Ottoman control over

Mecca and Medina, and opened the Holy City up again to Muslim pilgrims of every stripe. Then he sent Aziz ibn Saud's son and successor to Istanbul to be paraded before derisive crowds and then beheaded.

Little more was heard of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance for about a century, but the alliance did not die. The executed chieftain had a son who took over the collapsed remnants of the Saudi confederacy. Now he was just a minor tribal chieftain again, but he was still a chieftain, and he was still a Wahhabi, and wherever he could still impose his authority, Wahhabi ulama presided and prospered. Wahhab was dead, but Wahhabism lived on.

What were its tenets?

You can look long and hard through the actual writings of Abdul Wahhab and not find Wahhabism as it is defined today. That's largely because Abdul Wahhab didn't write political tracts; he wrote Qur'anic commentary and wrote it strictly in the vocabulary of his doctrine. His single-minded focus on details of Muslim doctrine, law, and practice might strike outsiders as obsessive. His major work, *Kitab-al-Tawhid* (*The Book of Unity*) has sixty-six chapters, each of which presents one or more quotes from the Qur'an, unpacks each quote, lists lessons to be learned from the quote, and then explains how this quote relates to Wahhab's core creed. There is no talk here of East or West, nothing about Western influence or Muslim weakness, nothing recognizably political at all. To read Wahhab's words is to realize that he looked at the world through purely religious spectacles. In his own view, his entire theology boiled down to two tenets: first, the importance of *tawhid,* or "unity," that is, the singleness and unity of God; and second, the fallacy of *shirk*, the idea that anyone or anything shared in God's divinity to even the smallest degree.

Marx once said "I am not a Marxist," and if Abdul Wahhab were alive today, he might well say, "I am not a Wahhabi," but nonetheless, Wahhabism exists, and it now includes many further tenets that derive from Wahhab's preachings by implication or that developed historically from its application by Saudi chieftains. This expanded Wahhabism told Muslims that the Law was Islam and Islam was the Law; getting it right, knowing it fully, and following it exactly was the whole of the faith.

The Law was all right there in the Qur'an, according to Wahhab and his followers. The sunna—the life of the Prophet as revealed through

hadith—amounted to a commentary on the Law. The Qur'an did not prescribe principles to guide human behavior but actual acts Muslims were to perform. It revealed not just the form but the content of human life. In the life of Prophet Mohammed, it gave a stencil for every Muslim to follow.

Medina in the time of Mohammed and the first *three* khalifas was the ideal community, the one time and place when everybody knew the law, got the law and followed it fully. That was why the First Community was able to flourish and expand so miraculously. That Medina was the stencil for every Muslim community to recreate.

The purpose of life was to follow the Law. The purpose of social and political life was to build the community in which the Law could be reified. All who hindered the great task of building that ideal community were enemies of Islam. The obligations of a Muslim included participation in jihad, the struggle to defeat the enemies of Islam. Jihad was right up there with prayer, fasting, alms, pilgrimage, and attesting to the unity of God as a religious obligation.

And who were the enemies of Islam?

According to Wahhab's doctrines, those who did not believe in Islam were, of course, potential enemies but not the most crucial offenders. If they agreed to live peacefully under Muslim rule, they could be tolerated. The enemies of real concern were slackards, apostates, hypocrites, and innovators.

Slackards were Muslims who talked the talk but didn't really walk the walk. They espoused the creed, but when it was time to pray, you found them playing cards or taking naps. They had to be punished so they would not corrupt other Muslims. Apostates were those who were born into or had converted to Islam but had then renounced it. They were to be killed. Hypocrites were those who said they were Muslims but weren't really. They mouthed the words but in their hearts their allegiance went to some other faith. They were inherently a fifth column working against the community and could commit disastrous betrayal in a crisis. Hypocrites were to be killed as soon as they were unmasked. And finally, perhaps the worst offenders of all were the innovators: Muslims who were corrupting Islam by adding to or altering any aspects of the pristine original Law. People who performed the rituals differently than the Pious Originals, or who performed rituals the Prophet and his companions never practiced, or who

advocated ideas not found in the Qur'an were innovators. Both the Shi'i and the Sufis belonged to this group. Jihad against them was not only legitimate but obligatory, according to Wahhabism as it developed in historical practice.

Wahhabi attitudes and enthusiasms spread far beyond Arabia. Wahhabism found particularly fertile ground at the other end of the Muslim world, in the subcontinent of India. In practice, various people who called themselves Wahhabis emphasized various aspects of the creed the Saudi tribe preached. In India, for example, some so-called Wahhabis rejected jihad as an obligation. Others said apostates should be engaged in debate not battle. Some thought slackards should be reeducated rather than punished or that hypocrites should be chastened rather than killed, or some other variation. But all who called themselves Wahhabis looked at the Law as the core of Islam, even the whole of Islam. All tended to look back to a golden era that provided a stencil for Muslim life and tended to believe that restoring the First Community of Mohammed's Medina would restore Muslims to favor in Allah's eyes, thereby restoring the vigor and power the Umma enjoyed under the first four khalifas.

Outside the Islamic world, the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance may have seemed like some brief anomaly that flared and vanished; but in fact it went on smoldering in the deserts of Arabia, and the world was to hear a great deal more about the alliance in the twentieth century, after the British agent remembered as Lawrence of Arabia found his way to that desert.

THE ALIGARH MOVEMENT: SECULAR MODERNISM

Sayyid Ahmad, or Sir Sayyid Ahmad of Aligarh, as he liked to be called later in life, represents an attitude of thought that sprang up independently in many parts of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. He and others began exploring ways to rethink Islam as an ethical system that would stay true to its own traditions and spirit but make it compatible with a secular world dominated by Europeans.

Sayyid Ahmad was born in 1817 to a prominent Muslim family in Delhi. His forebears had been important officials under the Moghuls, back when the Moghuls ruled this part of the world. Now, the British grip on the subcontinent had been deepening for many generations and Sayyid

Tamim Ansary, Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes. New York: Public Affairs, 2010, 301-318.

15

Rise of the Secular Modernists

1336-1357 AH
1918-1939 CE

By 1919, ASIA MINOR was crawling with French and Italian troops. Greek armies led by Greek nationalists dreaming of a Greater Greece were forging deep into the Ottoman heartland. Istanbul itself was occupied by British troops. Resistance movements bubbled up throughout Anatolia, coalescing around a hawk-faced general with piercing eyes. He was Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk—Father of the Turks. His forces drove out all the foreigners and in 1923 he declared the birth of a new nation-state: Turkey.

Turkey was not to be the Ottoman Empire reinvented. Atatürk repudiated the Ottoman past; he repudiated empire. He claimed nothing outside Asia Minor because he sought a coherent territory that made sense as a *country*. Henceforth, Turkey was to be a state with clear and immutable borders within which the majority of people would be ethnic Turks and the language would be Turkish. In this new country, Islam would be excluded from any role in public policy and demoted to the private sphere

where it might go on thriving as a religion like any other, so long as its adherents didn't bother the neighbors.

Turkey was thus the first Muslim-majority country to declare itself secular and to make the separation of politics and religion an official policy. Having demoted Islam, however, Atatürk needed some other principle to unify his new country, so he elaborated an ideology that sanctified six isms: nationalism, secularism, reformism, statism, populism, and republicanism. Turks still call this creed Kemalism, and some of version of it, usually emphasizing the first four isms, spread to or sprang up throughout the Islamic world after World War I.

Atatürk's nationalism was not to be confused with the hardcore militarism of the Committee for Union and Progress. The roots of both went back to the Young Turks, but "Young Turkism" was a broad movement spanning a gamut from liberal constitutionalism to fascism, and Atatürk's was a flexible, cultural nationalism that grew out of the liberal end.

It was cultural nationalism that led Atatürk to discard the many languages spoken in the Ottoman Empire in favor of one national language, Turkish. The many dialects and variants of Turkish spoken in the old empire gave way to a single standard dialect, and not the literary Turkish of the old court but a purified form of the street Turkish spoken by the masses. Some enthusiasts then wanted to ban all words that had crept into Turkish from other languages, but Atatürk disarmed this agitation with a simple narrative: Turkish, he said, was the mother of all the languages, so words borrowed from other languages were simply Turkish words coming home. The Arabic script, however, the one in which Turkish had long been written, was replaced by a new *Latin* alphabet.

A modernist to the core, Atatürk did not declare himself king or sultan. He had a new constitution written, set up a parliament, and established a republican form of government with himself as president. The parliamentary democracy he built endures to this day, but let's be frank: another leader could not have replaced Atatürk through the ballot box in his lifetime—hey, he was Father of the Turks! One does not vote one's *father* out of office! And although he was no military dictator and his ruling circle was not a junta (he established and abided by the rule of law), Atatürk did come up through the military and he valued discipline; so he herded his people toward his vision for the country with a military man's direct, iron-handed resolve.

What was his vision? To break the authority of the ulama in Turkey, unseat Islam as the arbiter of social life, and authorize a secular approach to the management of society. In the Western context, this makes him a "moderate." In the Islamic context, it made him a breathtakingly radical extremist.

First up on his agenda: opening the public sphere to women. Toward this end, he promulgated new laws that gave women the right to vote, hold public office, and own property. He had polygamy outlawed, discouraged dowries, frowned on traditional marriage customs, and sponsored new rules for divorce based on the Swiss civil code, not the Qur'an and hadith.

He also banned veils and head scarves, part of a new state-sanctioned dress code that applied to men as well as women—for example, the fez was banned too. Turbans and beards were strongly discouraged. Derby hats were okay, though, and so were bowlers, baseball caps, and berets. Atatürk himself wore suits and ties and urged his fellow Turks to do the same.

The religious establishment was shocked when ballroom dancing was introduced as official entertainment at state functions, but there was nothing they could do about it. Atatürk meant business, and he had the power and prestige to get it done. His parliament backed him to the hilt when he proposed a law requiring that public readings of the Qur'an henceforth be conducted in Turkish, not Arabic—blasphemy to the devout. Parliament backed him again when he moved the workers' day off from Friday to Sunday—to *Sunday!* Atatürk's government went on to close religious schools, shut down the Sufi brotherhoods, and abolish the waqfs—those ancient religion-based charitable foundations—in favor of state-dispensed social services. In 1925, Atatürk capped his secular modernist revolution with a truly jolting declaration: he declared the khalifate dead.

This wasn't actually breaking news, of course. For all practical purposes, the khalifate had been dead for centuries, but in the world between Istanbul and the Indus, the khalifate held a special place in the public imagination roughly analogous to that of ancient Rome in the West: it embodied the lingering dream of a universal community. In the West, the ghost of Rome persisted right to the end of World War I, visible in such traces as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was really just the final form of "the Holy Roman Empire," and in the titles of the last German and Russian rulers before World War I—*kaiser* and *czar* were both variations on *Caesar*. Rome had been dead for centuries, but the Roman ideal of a universal state

did not fully wink out until the end of World War I. The same was true of the khalifate. When Atatürk abolished the khalifate, he was abolishing an idea, and that's what jolted the Muslim world.

Or at least it jolted traditionalists, but who cared what they thought? They were no longer in power. In fact, Atatürk would turn out to be the prototypical Muslim leader of the half-century to come. Iran generated its own version of the prototype. After the war, the last Qajar king faced the "Jungle Revolution," a guerilla insurgency launched by admirers of Sayyid Jamaluddin-i-Afghan. The king's forces consisted of two armies, one commanded by Swedish officers, one by Russian mercenaries.[1] Little did the king realize that the real threat to his rule lay not in the jungle but among the foreigners propping him up. When Bolsheviks began joining the jungle revolutionaries, the British got nervous. Lenin had just seized power in Russia and they didn't want this sort of thing to spread. The British decided the king wasn't tough enough to squelch Bolsheviks, so they helped an Iranian colonel overthrow him.

This colonel, Reza Pahlavi, was a secular modernist in the Atatürk mold, except that he had no use for democracy (few secular modernist leaders did). In 1925, the colonel declared himself king, becoming Reza *Shah* Pahlavi, founder of a new Iranian dynasty. From the throne, he launched the same sorts of reforms as Atatürk, especially in the matter of a dress code. Head scarves, veils, turbans, beards—these were banned for ordinary citizens. Registered clerics could still wear turbans in the new Iran, but they had to have a license certifying that they really were clerics (and how could they meet this irksome proviso, given that Islam never had a formal institution for "certifying" clerics?). Still, anyone caught wearing a turban without a license could be beaten on the street and hauled off to prison.

Much the same thing was happening in Afghanistan, where, an impetuous young man named Amanullah inherited the throne in 1919. An ardent admirer of the Young Turks, this moon-faced fellow with a Hercule Poirot moustache gave Afghanistan a liberal constitution, declared women liberated, funded a nascent secular school system lavishly, and, yes, declared the usual dress code: no veils, no beards, no turbans, etc.

What I find interesting about this dress-code policy is that radical Islamists did exactly the same thing fifty years later when they came back into power in Iran and Afghanistan, except that their dress code was the

opposite: suddenly, women were *forced* to wear head scarves and men were beaten for appearing in public *without* beards. But the principle of beating and imprisoning people for their clothes and grooming—this principle, both sides embraced.

The three rulers between Istanbul and the Hindu Kush could use state power to push the secular modernist agenda. Other parts of Dar al-Islam still lived under imperial rule but had vigorous independence movements, which were also led by secular modernists. In India, for example, the most prominent Muslim leader was the suave, British-educated attorney named Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

In short, secular modernism surged up throughout the Muslim world in the 1920s, one society after another falling under the sway of this new political creed. I will call it secular modernism, even though the term is inadequate, because secular-modernist-nationalist-statist-developmentalist is too cumbersome and even then doesn't cover the entire movement. Suffice to say, this was a broad river of attitude and opinion that drew upon ideas explored earlier by the likes of Sayyid Ahmad of Aligarh, Amir Kabir of Iran, the Young Turks of Istanbul, and countless other intellectuals, educated workers, professionals, writers, and activists from the middle classes that had been emerging in the Middle World for a century. Suddenly, Muslim societies knew where they were going: the same way as the West. They were behind, of course, they would have to play desperate catch-up, but that was all the more reason to hurry, all the more reason to steamroll over nuances and niceties like democracy and get the crash program underway—the core of which crash program was "development."

In Afghanistan and Iran, the state clamped down on citizens, but did so in pursuit of a "progressive" agenda. Monarchs in both countries set out to build roads, dams, power plants, factories, hospitals, and office buildings. Both established airline companies, set up state-run (and state-censored) newspapers, and built national radio stations. Both countries continued to grow their secular public schools. Iran already had a national university and Afghanistan founded one now. Both governments promulgated policies to liberate women and draw them into the public realm. Both were eager to make their countries more "Western" but saw no connection between this and expanding their subjects' freedom. What they promised was not freedom but prosperity and self-respect.

It would be quite plausible to say that at this point, Islam as a world-historical narrative came to an end. Wrong but plausible. The Western cross-current had disrupted Muslim societies, creating the deepest angst and the most agonizing doubts. The secular modernists proposed to settle the spiritual turmoil by realigning their societies with the Western current. Make no mistake, most of these leaders still thought of themselves as Muslims; they just adopted a new idea of what "Muslim" meant. Most still worked to break the grip of specific Western powers over their specific people; they just did so as revolutionary anticolonialists rather than as zealous Muslims committed to promoting Islam as one big community on a mission from God. These elites sought to make gains by holding the West to its own standards and ideals and in doing this they implicitly validated the Western framework of assumptions.

They were not without popular support. Throughout the Middle World, traditional, religious Islam was quiescent now: beaten and subdued. Educated people tended to see the old-fashioned scholars and clerics as quaint. The ulama, the scriptural literalists, the miracle merchants, the orthodox "believers"—all these had dominated Dar al-Islam for centuries, and what had they created? Threadbare societies that couldn't build a car or invent an airplane, much less stand up to Western might. Their failure discredited their outlook, and a sizable public was ready to give someone else a turn. The future belonged to the secular modernists.

Or so it seemed.

But secular modernism was not the only reformist current to come out of the nineteenth-century Muslim world. What of the other currents? What of the Wahhabis, for example? What of Sayyid Jamaluddin's disciples? These movements should not be confused with orthodox Islam or old-fashioned religious conservatism. They were just as new-fangled as secular modernism, just as intent on smashing the status quo.

Even the Wahhabis, by their very appeal to a mythic moment in the distant past, were rejecting the petrified present (and the twelve centuries that led up to it). And they still breathed in the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, they seized state power there, with the founding of Saudi Arabia, about which more later. Outside Arabia, the Wahhabis could not gain much purchase among the educated elite or the new middle classes but they preached away in rural mosques to ill-educated and impoverished villagers.

For that audience their message had resonance, especially in India. When they spoke of a glorious past, revivable only by a return to the ways of the First Community, the poor and dispossessed knew who they were talking about. They could see their own elites drifting away from the Muslim way of life, and boasting about it! They were to blame for Muslim weakness. In fact, if the Wahhabi narrative held water, the poverty of the rural poor was the fault of the urban rich.

In 1867, a group of puritanical Indian Wahhabis had built a religious seminary in a town called Deoband. For fifty years, missionaries pouring out of this seminary had been spreading through the subcontinent preaching Indian Wahhabism. In the late 1920s, these Deobandis gave a glimmer of their strength in Afghanistan.

King Amanullah, upon coming to the throne, had dazzled his country by declaring full independence from the British and sending troops to the border. The battles were inconclusive but he won Afghanistan's independence at the bargaining table, making him the first and only Muslim monarch to win a direct confrontation with a major European power. Indian Wahhabis exultantly proclaimed him the new khalifa; but Amanullah was not the kind of man to accept that mantle. In fact, he "betrayed" the Deobandis by launching the full array of Atatürkist initiatives mentioned earlier. The Indian Wahhabis swore to bring the apostate down.

And they did it, but not by themselves. They got help from Great Britain. This may seem odd, because Amanullah was culturally so much more in tune with British values than the Deobandis were. European ideals were his ideals. But perhaps the British recognized him as a threat for that very reason. They knew what an anti-imperialist revolutionary was; they had seen Lenin. They didn't know what a Deobandi was. Bearded preachers swathed in turbans no doubt struck them as picturesque primitives who might serve a purpose. Britain therefore fed funds and guns into the Deobandi campaign against Amanullah and soon, with further help from radical local clerics, the Deobandis set Afghanistan ablaze. In 1929, they managed to drive Amanullah into tragic exile.

Amid the uproar, a *really* primitive bandit, colorfully nicknamed the Water Carrier's Son, seized the Afghan capital. The bandit ruled for nine riotous months, during which time he not only imposed "pure" Islamic rule but undid all of Amanullah's reforms, wrecked the city, and drained

the treasury. Anyone who knows what the Taliban did in Afghanistan at the end of the century will recognize an eerily precise preview of their carnage in the career of the Water Carrier's Son. By the time he was finished, Afghans were so sick of chaos, they were eager to accept a strongman. The British obliged them by helping a more compliant member of the old royal clan claim the Afghan throne, a grim despot named Nadir Shah.

This new king was a secular modernist too, but a chastened one. He guided his country back toward the Atatürkist road but very, very slowly, taking care not to offend the British, and placating his hometown Deobandis by clamping down on Afghanistan socially and culturally.

So much for Wahhabism. What of the reformist current embodied by Sayyid Jamaluddin? Was that one dead? Not at all. Intellectually, Jamaluddin's work was carried forward by his chief disciple, Mohammed Abduh, who taught at Egypt's prestigious thousand-year-old Al Azhar University. Abduh pulled the Master's patchwork of ideas together into a coherent Islamic modernist doctrine. Abduh's own disciple and friend Rashid Rida went on to explore how a modern state might actually be administered on Islamic principles.

Then came Hassan al-Banna, perhaps the most important of Sayyid Jamaluddin's intellectual progeny. This Egyptian schoolteacher was more activist than philosopher. In 1928, he founded a club called the Muslim Brotherhood, originally something like a Muslim version of the Boy Scouts. This was a seminal event for Islamism, but one that went virtually unnoticed at the time.

Banna lived and taught in the Suez Canal Zone, where he could feel the scrape of West against East every day. Virtually all trade between Europe and the eastern colonies passed through this canal, which was the most boomingly modern structure in Egypt, and every cargo ship had to pay a steep toll. A European firm owned by British and French interests operated the canal and took 93 percent of the rich revenue it generated. Foreign technicians therefore abounded in the Canal Zone, making this little strip of land the starkest embodiment of two worlds intersecting. One whole infrastructure of shops, restaurants, cafés, dance halls, bars, and other services catered to the European community. Another whole infrastructure consisted of markets, coffeehouses, and whatnot frequented by Egyptians of the humbler classes: two worlds interwoven but entirely distinct.

Hassan Banna saw his fellow Egyptians earnestly struggling to learn European languages and manners, trying slavishly to acquire enough Westernized polish to enter the Western world, even if only as workers of the lowest strata. The sight of all this Egyptian envy and subservience offended his pride. He founded the Muslim Brotherhood to help Muslim boys interact healthily with one another, learn about their own culture, and acquire some self respect. Boys dropped into the Brotherhood center after school to play sports, at which time they also received lessons in Islam and Muslim history from Banna and his instructors.

Eventually the boys' fathers and older brothers started dropping in as well, so the Brotherhood began offering evening programs for adults, which were so popular that new centers were opened up. By the mid-1930s, the brotherhood had outgrown its origins as a club for boys and become a fraternal organization for men.

From this, it slowly morphed into a political movement, a movement that declared secular Islam and Egypt's own "Westernized" elite to be the country's chief enemies. The Muslim Brothers opposed nationalism, the impulse to secure sovereignty for small separate states such as Syria, Libya, or Egypt. They called on Muslims to resurrect instead the one big transnational Umma, a new khalifate embodying the unity of all Muslims. Like Sayyid Jamaluddin, they preached pan-Islamic modernization without Westernization.

The Muslim Brotherhood was taking shape around the same time the United States was struggling with the Great Depression. In this same period, the Nazis were taking over Germany, and Stalin was consolidating his grip on the Soviet Union. Outside of Egypt, no one knew much about the brotherhood, not because it was secretive (at first) but because it had few adherents among the Egyptian elite and held little interest for foreign journalists. Even Egyptian newspapers published few stories about its activities and the Western press none at all. Why would they? This was mostly a movement of the urban working poor, and the foreigners who came and went through Egypt hardly noticed those hordes moving like shadows through the streets, doing the heavy lifting and loading, providing services, and begging for "baksheesh," as tips were called (prompting the writer S. J. Perlman to quip of Egypt, "It's not the heat, it's the cupidity").

As Westernization and industrialization proceeded, Egypt's urban working poor kept proliferating. With the expansion of this class, the brotherhood

outgrew even its identity as a political movement and became more of a pandemic low-level insurgency—seething against secularism and Western influence, seething against its own modernist elite, against its own government, against all nationalist governments in Muslim countries, even against the apparatus of democracy to the extent that this reflected Western values.

By the late thirties, then, secular leaders throughout the Muslim world, whether they held state power or spearheaded independence movements, found themselves squeezed between two sets of forces: European imperialists still pressed down on them from above; meanwhile, Islamist insurgents were pushing up from below. What was a leader to do?

Under this kind of pressure, politicians typically try to associate themselves with some popular passion to shore up support; and often the passion they tap into for this purpose is religion. But religion was the one passion secular modernists could not appeal to, because it was the very thing they were trying to move their societies away from. So they waved two other banners instead. One was "development" and the material prosperity it would bring; and the other was nationalism, which they claimed to represent. In Iran, for example, the Pahlavi regime tried to invoke a connection to pre-Islamic Persia. In Afghanistan, the Nadir Shah regime insisted on declaring Pushto a national language, even though only a minority spoke it at home. Everywhere, the glories of the nation, the splendor of its culture, and the proud history of its people were trumpeted.

Nationalist sentiment was not in short supply; lots of *that* was sloshing around in the Middle World at this time. The trouble was, most of the new nation-states were rather artificial. Afghanistan, for example, had been created by Russia and Britain. Iran, until recently, had been a loose conglomeration of disparate parts, an empire, not a country. Turkey was a nation-state because Atatürk said so. As for India, where does one even begin?

But the most problematic region for nationalism was the Arab heartland. Here's why.

After World War I, the victors had met at Versailles, France, to reshape the world. As a prelude to that conference, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson had given a speech to the U.S. Congress laying out a "fourteen point" vision of a new world order that most colonized people found inspiring. To Arabs, the most thrilling of Wilson's Fourteen Points was his declaration that every people's right to self-rule must be respected and accommodated. Wilson had

also suggested creating a neutral "League of Nations" to adjudicate international issues, such as the fate of Arab-inhabited lands formerly ruled by the Ottomans. At Versailles, the "peacemakers" had set up just such a body.

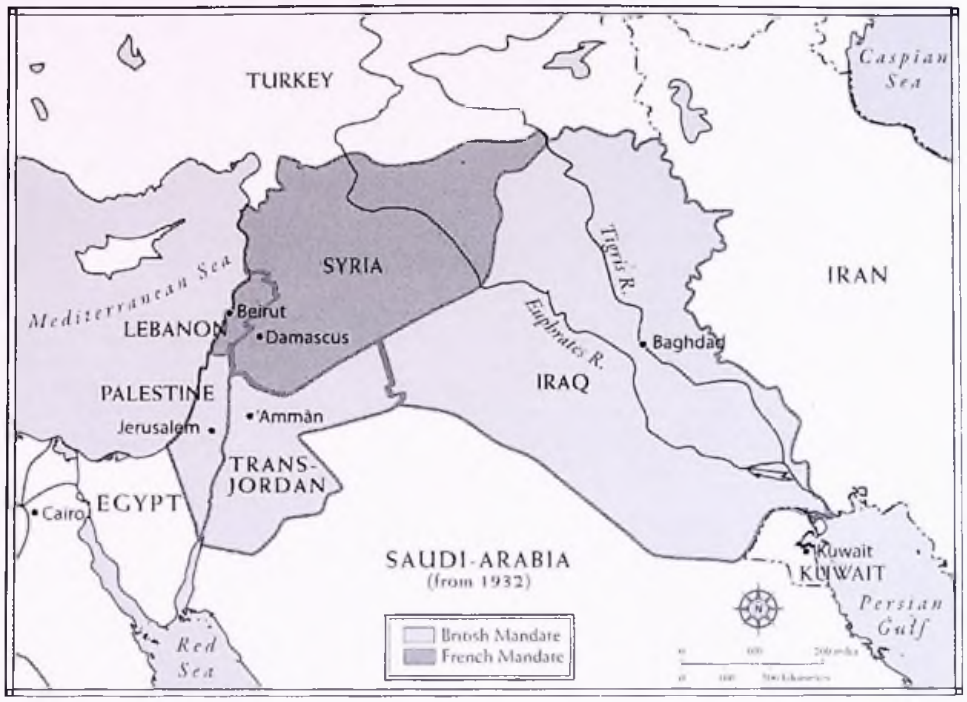
But stunningly enough, the United States refused to join this body! And once the League set to work, the European victors of World War I quickly turned it into an instrument of their will. In principle, for example, the League endorsed the idea of self-rule in the Arab world, but in practice, it implemented the Sykes-Picot agreement, dividing the area into zones called "mandates," which were awarded to Britain and France. The document setting up these mandates called them territories "inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" and said "the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their . . . experience . . . can best undertake this responsibility." In short, it spoke of Arabs as children and of Europeans as grown-ups who would take care of them until they could do grown-up things like feed themselves—such was the language directed at a people who, if the Muslim narrative were still in play, would have been honored as the progenitors of civilization itself—and who still retained some such sense of themselves.[2]

France got Syria for its mandate, and Great Britain got pretty much everything else in the "Middle East." France divided its mandated territory into two countries, Syria and Lebanon, the latter an artificial state with borders gerrymandered to ensure a demographic majority for the Maronite Christians, whom France regarded as its special clients in the region.

Great Britain had clients to satisfy as well, beginning with the Hashimites who had led that helpful Arab Revolt, so the British bundled together three former Ottoman provinces to create a new country called Iraq and made one of their Hashimite clients king of it. The lucky man was Faisal, second son of the sheikh of Mecca.

Faisal, however, had an older brother named Abdullah, and it wasn't seemly for a younger brother to have a country while his older brother had none, so another country was carved out of the British mandate and given to Abdullah, and this was Jordan.

Unfortunately, the boys' father ended up with nothing at all, because in 1924 that other British client in the region, Aziz ibn Saud, attacked Mecca with a band of religious troops, took the holy city, and ousted the



DIVISION OF THE ARAB WORLD: THE MANDATES PLAN

Hashemite patriarch. Ibn Saud went on to conquer 80 percent of the Arabian Peninsula. Only Yemen, Oman, and a few sliver-sized coastal emirates remained outside his grasp. The European powers did nothing to stop him because he too held some IOUs. In 1932, Ibn Saud declared his holdings a sovereign new country called Saudi Arabia.

In Egypt, meanwhile, Great Britain succumbed to its own pieties and declared the country independent, sovereign, and free—with a few caveats. First, Egyptians could not change their form of government; they must remain a monarchy. Second, Egyptians could not replace their actual rulers; they must retain their existing royal family. Third, the Egyptians must accept the continued presence of British military forces and bases on their soil. Fourth, the Egyptians must leave the Suez Canal in British hands without protest. Fifth, the private company controlled by Britain and France must continue to collect all fees from that busiest of sea channels and send the bulk of it back to Europe.

Egypt *would* get an elected parliament, but this parliament's decisions must be approved by British authorities in Cairo. Beyond these few points, Egypt was to consider itself sovereign, independent, and free. Egypt

quickly developed a full-fledged (secular modernist) independence movement, of course, which offended the British, because why would an independent country need an independence movement? Didn't they get the memo? Apparently not.

The French faced a bit of resistance too, in Syria. There, a Sorbonne-educated Christian Arab writer named Michel Aflaq was elaborating a pan-Arab nationalist ideology. He asserted the existence of a mystical Arab soul forged by a common language and a shared historical experience that gave a unified singleness to the vast body of Arabic-speaking people. Like all the other twentieth century nationalists inspired by nineteenth century European philosophers, Aflaq argued that the "Arab nation" was entitled to a single contiguous state ruled by Arabs.

Although he was Christian, Aflaq put Islam at the center of Arabism, but only as a historical relic. Islam, he said, had awakened the Arab soul at a certain moment in history and made it the spearhead of a global quest for justice and progress, so Arabs of every religion should honor Islam as a product of the Arab soul. What counted, however, was the Arab soul, and Arabs should therefore seek a rebirth of their spirit, not in Islam, but in "the Arab Nation." Aflaq was a hardcore secular modernist and in 1940 he and a friend founded a political party to pursue their vision. They called it the Ba'ath, or "rebirth" party.

Four new countries were carved out of the European mandates, a fifth one emerged independently, and Egypt acquired pseudoindependence. But one question remained unresolved: what should be done with Palestine? The principle of self-rule dictated that it too should become a country ruled by itself, but who was its "self?" Was the natural "nation" here the Arabs, who constituted nearly 90 percent of the population and had been living here for centuries? Or was it the Jews, most of whom had come here from Europe in the last two decades but whose ancestors had lived here two thousand years ago? Hmm: tough question.

To the Arabs, the answer seemed obvious: this should be one more Arab country. To the Jewish immigrants from Europe, the answer also seemed obvious: whatever the exact legal arrangements, this patch of territory should become a secure Jewish homeland, because Jews were endangered everywhere else in the world and only Palestine made sense as a place they could call their own. Besides Britain's Balfour had made them that memorable promise.

Britain decided to make *no* grand decision about Palestine at all, but to deal with events de facto as they came up and just see how things went.

How on earth could secular modernist leaders use nationalism to bind together their dubious nations, especially since some of their own were calling for an Arab nation transcending existing boundaries—while at the same time Islamists and Wahhabis were saying to hell with nations; to hell with ethnic identity politics; we're all Muslims; let's rebuild the khalifate?

Ultimately, in this environment, the success of secular modernism hung on two things. First, since the secular modernists kept waving the banner of "development," they had to develop something and deliver the prosperity they evoked. Second, since they sought legitimacy through nationalism, they had to gain actual independence for their nations.

In the decades after World War I, however, they failed to achieve either goal. They failed because, despite the thrilling rhetoric of Wilson's Fourteen Points, there was never any real chance of the Western powers loosening their grip on the core of the Muslim world.

No chance of it because at this point every Western power was racing to outindustrialize every other. The Western powers were moving toward an apocalyptic showdown fueled by ideologies, communism, fascism, nazism, democracy. The stakes were absolute. Victory depended on industrial strength, industrialism now depended on petroleum, and most of the world's petroleum lay under Muslim-inhabited soil.

The first big pools of petroleum oil had been discovered in the late nineteenth century in Pennsylvania and Canada but at the time these discoveries had sparked little excitement because the only product really made from petroleum back then was kerosene, and kerosene was used only to light lamps, for which purpose most consumers preferred whale oil.

In 1901, the first of the big Middle Eastern oil fields was detected in Iran by a British prospector named William Knox D'Arcy. He promptly bought exclusive rights to all of Iran's petroleum from the Qajar king of the time, in exchange for a sum of cash stuffed immediately into that shah's pockets, and a 16 percent royalty payable to the Iranian treasury later, a royalty to be calculated on "net profits" realized from Iran's petroleum, not on the gross, which means that D'Arcy's lease made no guarantees about how much money Iran *ever* stood to make from its oil.

You might wonder what sort of king would sell his country's entire stock of *any* mineral known and unknown for cash to some vagabond wandering through and why the citizens of the country would not immediately depose such a king. The answer is, first: tradition. The Qajar kings had been doing this sort of thing for a hundred years. Second, the country had just struggled mightily to scuttle the tobacco monopoly, which their king had sold to British interests, a struggle that had left the country's activists exhausted. Third, oil didn't seem very important; it wasn't *tobacco*, for God's sake (or even whale oil). Fourth, activists were girding for a struggle that did seem more important than oil and tobacco combined: the struggle for a constitution and a parliament. The oil deal therefore went unnoticed.

At the very time that Iran was giving away its oil, however, the importance of oil was about to skyrocket, due to a new invention: the internal combustion engine. *External* combustion engines such as steam engines ran on anything that burned, which in practice meant wood or coal; but *internal* combustion engines ran strictly on refined petroleum.

In the 1880s, a German inventor had used this type of engine to power a big tricycle. That tricycle evolved into a car. By 1904, cars were becoming just popular enough in Europe and the United States that some roads were being rebuilt to accommodate them. Soon after that, trains started to run on oil. Then in 1903 the airplane was invented. Next, ocean-going ships began switching over.

World War I saw the first use of tanks, the first oil-powered navies, and the first airplanes that dropped bombs. By the time the war ended, anyone could tell that petroleum-powered war machinery would grow only more sophisticated and that whoever owned the world's oil would end up owning the world.

For Iran, that realization came too late. William D'Arcy had already sold his Iranian oil concession to a company owned by the British government (it still exists: it's now British Petroleum, or BP). By 1923, according to Winston Churchill, Great Britain had earned 40 million pounds from Iranian oil, while Iran had earned about 2 million from it.[3]

Meanwhile, that British company had joined forces with Royal Dutch Shell and certain U.S. interests to form a supercompany ("the Turkish Petroleum Company") that proposed to look for oil in the Ottoman provinces

bordering the Persian Gulf. By the time the supercompany was ready to drill, the area in question was part of the British "mandate." It was then that the British created Iraq and put their Hashemite client in charge of it. The oil consortium immediately approached King Faisal for a monopoly on the country's oil resources, and he gladly accommodated them. Going into the negotiation, the Iraqis were hoping for a 20 percent equity share in the company, but they compromised at 0 percent, in exchange for a flat fee per ton of oil extracted, that sum not to be linked in any way to the price of oil or the company's profits, at least for the first twenty years of the agreement. Equity in the company was divided among the several European powers and the United States, and the only real wrangling was among them over who would get what percent. In 1927, after all these issues had been settled, the company found the first of Iraq's enormous oil fields.[4]

Nine years later, Aziz ibn Saud celebrated the discovery of oil in his realm as well. Saudi Arabia would, in fact, turn out to have the world's biggest reserves of the crucial mineral. The Saudis had barely started pumping their oil when World War II broke out and the strategic significance of oil soared even higher. During that war, U. S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt met with Ibn Saud, and the two men reached an understanding to which both sides have adhered faithfully ever since, even though it is not enshrined in any formal public treaty. The deal ensures the U.S. unfettered access to Saudi oil; in exchange, the Saudi royal family gets as much U.S. military equipment and technology as it needs to stay in power against all comers. Indirectly, this understanding partnered the United States with the Wahhabi clerical establishment and made American military prowess the guarantor of the Wahhabi reform movement. And by the time World War II broke out, the Wahhabis, and the Islamists throughout Dar al-Islam were gathering their strength for a full assault on the secular modernists.

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The Crisis of Modernity

1357–1385 AH
1939–1966 CE

THE BLOODIEST OUTBURST in the history of violence started in 1939 and raged for six long years. Once again, Germany was battling France and Britain. Once again the United States came in late but decided the outcome. Parts of the configuration had changed this time, to be sure: Russia was now the Soviet Union, the Ottomans were missing, Japan had grown mighty—but in the end, this bloodbath only finished what World War I had begun. The old colonial empires suffered death blows, and the old alignments of power became obsolete. Britain came out of the war starving, France in ruins, Germany destroyed and divided. With the gunfire fading, two new superpowers stood astride the globe, and both were soon armed with thermonuclear bombs capable of destroying the human race. The next chapter of world history would be dominated by their competition.

Other narratives continued to play out, however, beneath the surface of the bipolar Cold War struggle, including the submerged narrative of Islam as a world-historical event. The hunger for independence, which had built

CHAPTER 8

Police States

"Is this an interrogation?"
"No, it's just tea."

While I talked to various Arabs and Iranians about the need for change in the normal course of my reporting, I could never focus exclusively on the issue due to the swirl of events. Then the American government embarked on its campaign to make democratization and political reform a key plank in its policy toward the region. With that, I began fishing around for a way to assess prospects for a different Middle East. The American argument—badly conceived by accentuating democratic elections and soon abandoned—was at least rooted in a sound idea, namely that creating open societies is the most effective long-term means to undermine extremism.

I decided the best way to proceed was to search out reformers pursuing that goal. There were plenty of political types or the usual

mukhabarat to squash opponents, no leader old or young is expected to dismantle those powers anytime soon. Weak governments find it far easier to compensate for their lack of a popular mandate by strengthening the secret police rather than opening up the system.

The security agencies have become a law unto themselves, their reach pushing far beyond security into politics, the media, and business. In Jordan they have a hand in approving who gets to be a university professor, an ambassador, or an important newspaper editor. Students must obtain a good-behavior certificate from the GID if they seek admission to a public university under certain government programs. (The GID denies that anyone is obliged to obtain such a certificate, although it notes that some organizations "require" them.) The mukhabarat eavesdrops with the help of thousands of Jordanians on its payroll, similar to the informant networks in the Soviet bloc. Secret police chiefs live above the law. One recent chief, a chain smoker, used to overrule the ban on smoking when he was on board Royal Jordanian flights. No one dared challenge him, and passengers who complained to the airline were told there was nothing it could do.

The State Department's annual human rights report on Jordan released in March 2008 repeated a list of charges that has not changed much in recent years. The report was unusually critical of a staunch ally, particularly one whose security services have cooperated closely with their Washington counterparts in capturing terrorism suspects. The report noted that both the mukhabarat and the regular police are accused of acting with impunity, including frequent allegations of torture, arbitrary arrest, and prolonged detention. "The government harassed members of opposition political parties and restricted freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, movement and some religious practices," the report stated.

Some Jordanians, while telling me that they support political reform, argued that the central role of the secret police is essential until the Middle East becomes more stable, or at least until the threat from religious extremists diminishes. But political activists

deem progress impossible until such overweening influence is curbed. "The Jordanian state has failed to find a balanced formula between security and democracy," Labib Kamhawi, a businessman and longtime human rights activist, told me. "The issue of security has become a nightmare. If you give a speech against the policy of the government, this is a threat to security. If you demonstrate against this or that, it is a threat to security. It hits on all aspects of life and it is a severe hindrance to any change."

The issue is hardly unique to Jordan. It was a complaint I heard repeatedly from all Arabs and Iranians pushing reform. Foreigners are not immune to the long tentacles of the mukhabarat, either. Indeed, "mukhabarat" is likely among the first Arabic words any expatriate learns.

My Egyptian assistant and I were detained in late 2001 for loitering outside the Cairo headquarters of the secret police. (Our attention was focused on a school opposite its front door.) After several rounds of questioning and demands for identification, one false release, and a couple telephone calls to the Ministry of Information to confirm that we were legally registered journalists, we were eventually ushered into the office of a major. He politely asked us in English to sit down, and as I did I noticed the wall behind his battered desk was hung with roughly ten diplomas from the FBI, including one for sharpshooting and another for interrogation.

"Is this an interrogation?" I asked brightly.

"No, it's just tea," the major responded, grinning as an aide scuttled in with small, sugary glasses of the stuff.

We had a brief, friendly conversation about my impressions of Egypt, during which the major assured us that he was only acting in his capacity of protecting the well-being of some 5,000 Americans resident in Egypt. Then he let us go. But in the years afterward, whenever I was involved in any reporting in Egypt that state security considered dubious, the major would call. On one occasion I was out shopping for the latest underground tapes of sermons by extremist prayer leaders—and the cell phone rang. "What was on the tapes?" the major wanted to know. (Abeer, God

bless her, told him, "Go buy your own!") Outside the mass trial of some young Muslim Brothers, I got into a rare heated argument with some of their relatives. I generally tried to avoid arguments, but they got me going by defending Saddam Hussein's human rights record as not all that bad. (This was before the American invasion.) The major called to ask with whom I was arguing. Sometimes he would call to suggest story lines, which we would diplomatically agree to consider in hopes it might diminish the scrutiny. I never actually took one up. I lived with the creepy feeling of being watched, though, or at least being watched around certain types of government opponents. All Egyptian employees of Western news organizations were put under even greater pressure.

I confess, however, that the vague connection with a major in the secret police periodically had its advantages. On a black, rainy night in a squalid village in the Nile delta, for example, we tracked down the family of a senior Al-Qaeda operative whom the United States had killed in Afghanistan. After some initial hostility, his brother and a few beefy friends agreed that I could interview them just as soon as we went with them to get permission from the mukhabarat headquarters in the village. We followed them in our car, wondering what might have prompted their sudden change in mood. Nervously eying the darkened building behind a chain-link fence and the line-up of thugs with biceps the size of my thigh, we stalled inside the vehicle, quietly calling the major. Fortunately this was one time that he answered immediately. He told us that the local State Security building was in no such location. We did a quick U-turn in the car and high-tailed it out of there as the thugs scrambled for their own vehicle. The goon squad remained in angry pursuit even after we skidded out onto the highway, the men leaning out the windows of the car, cursing and raising their fists at us.

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In Jordan, the "Big Brother is watching" form of implied threat, not to mention more direct pressure like arrests and trials, crops up repeatedly in the lives of all those pushing for political change. Jordan has never been a police state on the gory scale of neighbors like Iraq or Syria, where dissidents either disappeared or lived out their lives in jail. Indeed, one reason I can use Jordan as the example of an ill that plagues the entire Arab world is that so many people were willing to talk about their encounters with the mukhabarat. In most other countries people were too afraid. In addition, the GID once made the head of its domestic affairs branch available to me to discuss the agency on condition that he not be identified. Getting an interview with any senior mukhabarat official was extremely rare. "There is no freedom like that in Jordan," the official enthused to me in Arabic. On my last visit to Jordan in 2008, I was told that the mukhabarat was attempting to become more user friendly, less intimidating. I opened its website to see if I could tell. Perhaps my favorite page on that particular outreach program was the "Frequently Asked Questions" segment, of which there were just four. I would have thought that the most common query would be something along the lines of "How do I find out which dungeon my relative is in?" but apparently Jordanians were more curious about the sartorial aspects of the job. "What does the GID staff wear?" was one question. (Perhaps people wanted to recognize the secret agents in their neighborhood.) The site explained that although most officers had military ranks, they were required to wear civilian clothes.

A European friend, an academic who spent decades in the Arab world after we first met in a Cairo Arabic class in 1982, calls Jordan "an inconspicuous police state." My encounters with Jordanians echoed that description. Some people whispered "the friends" in conversations with me about the secret police just in case any were eavesdropping. Around 80 percent of the respondents surveyed in repeated annual polls taken by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan said that they feared criticizing

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the government publicly lest they face trouble with the security services or elsewhere in their lives. More than three-quarters also said they feared participating in any manner of political activity ranging from demonstrations to opposition forums for the same reason. Such lingering fear regarding the secret police was one strong indicator that Jordanians doubt that King Abdullah II has an active reform program, despite how much he talks about it.

Sameer al-Qudah, the poet, summed up the general attitude for me: "We are supposed to be happy because we are not as bad off as our neighbors—the Palestinians under occupation or because we have more democracy than the Syrians or the Saudis and are more stable than Iraq. We are the best of the worst."

Born in 1970, Qudah was named after an uncle, a young lieutenant killed in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The oldest of nine children, his father an English teacher, he grew up in Ajloun, some thirty miles north of the capital, Amman. He remembers his first poem was an ode to the snow falling on the local reservoir that fed the surrounding orchards of apples, figs, and olives.

Qudah's political education started in grade school, when he was particularly struck by the history lessons surrounding the Sykes-Picot agreement, the British-French pact at the end of World War I that divided the Arab world into separate countries and laid the groundwork for a Jewish homeland. It is taught in the Arab world as the foremost of many modern betrayals that the colonial powers inflicted on the region.

His budding poetic talents were recognized by his teachers in the one-story limestone schoolhouse, chilly all winter, where he attended elementary school. On all national holidays Qudah was assigned to stand on top of the stairs and recite a few lines. That view, looking out over the cypress pines and oaks dotting the rolling red hills, still provided inspiration, he told me on the day he drove me around his hometown.

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Qudah's history of encounters with the secret police started in high school, when he helped lead a 1988 demonstration protesting the death of Khalil al-Wazir, a Palestinian Liberation Organization leader assassinated by Israeli commandoes in Tunis. By the time he was an undergraduate, his fellow engineering classmates used to call him "The Poet of the University of Jordan." He remembers being summoned by the mukhabarat some twenty times while at university.

Arabs hold dear their long tradition of expressing ideas through poetry, and so topics of wide public interest like political reform invariably provide inspiration. Criticizing the lack of freedom in Jordan or the wider Arab world always brings an enthusiastic response from the crowd whenever he is invited to recite, Qudah noted. "If you can express these feelings through poetry, the reaction is even warmer because Arabs enjoy poetry a lot. It is like music; you are making a speech but in a musical way."

Many politically active Jordanians like Qudah argue that the country has regressed under King Abdullah II, particularly compared to the political reform wrought by his father during the crisis of 1989. At that time, Jordan, spurred by the International Monetary Fund, lifted the subsidies on some basic goods. A day after widespread bread riots rocked the entire country that year, I drove through the southwestern highlands and found that virtually every government building had been sacked. Even in small villages where there were no state offices, residents had burned down the schoolhouse. The unrest over the economic costs prompted King Hussein to usher in political liberalization. He allowed free parliamentary elections, loosened the tight gag on the press, and lifted martial law, which had been in place since 1956. Under King Abdullah—on a host of issues including parliamentary life, election campaigns, the right to assemble, the right of free speech, and a free press—many Jordanians decried the lack of change given the emphasis put on the reform issue by the royal palace. In many cases, that lack is blamed on the influence of the mukhabarat.

Major General Rouhi Hikmet Rasheed served in the Jordanian army for thirty-three years, retiring as the military's chief dentist. He decided to run for parliament in the 2003 elections and his stump speech suggested that the goal of reform should be a real constitutional monarchy. The head of the mukhabarat called to tell him to desist, Dr. Rasheed said when I went to visit his clinic.

"He told me that if I meant we should have a monarch like Britain's, this is not in the best interests of the country," recalled Dr. Rasheed, who retained a ramrod military bearing, adding that the warning came with a threat. "He said, 'You are a son of the regime, we trust you, but if your sons want to work in Jordan in the future, it might affect them.'"

Dr. Rasheed told me that back in his army days, he would not have believed the story if someone had described the kinds of threats he faced. "Our system is a civilian dictatorship, which is far more dangerous than an individual dictatorship," he said. "At least with an individual dictator you can point your finger at him, but with a constitutional dictatorship you can't point your finger at anybody." It is a key problem in Jordan, and common to regimes across the Middle East, that the royal court or presidential coterie carrying out most of the important policy decisions is not accountable to anybody except the monarch.

Politically active Jordanians say the constant zigzagging over reform reflected King Abdullah's own ambiguity. The way he addresses it in the United States is markedly different from the way he rules. On frequent visits to the U.S., where he is a favorite on the talk-show circuit, he stated repeatedly that the goal of reform in the Hashemite kingdom is a constitutional monarchy. He is prone to make pronouncements that political change is needed so that the "Crown can take a step back and the people can take a step forward," as he did during one visit in 2005. Statements like these encouraged many reformers to begin pushing for a return to the 1952 constitution, with its more extensive checks on royal power, which prompted the king to announce at home that any discussion of amending the constitution to conform with that older version was unacceptable.

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The king spoke the language of reform in excellent English. He was, after all, sent to Deerfield Academy, the rigorous Massachusetts boarding school (as was I) and Sandhurst, the British equivalent of West Point. Some people conclude that a few democratic values must have rubbed off along the way. But Abdullah, born in 1962 of an English mother, was thrust onto the throne unexpectedly in 1999. King Hussein switched the line of succession on his deathbed, reportedly prompted by a family feud. He removed his own brother Hassan, who had been crown prince for decades, and made Abdullah, his oldest son, the heir. The young monarch was a special forces commander who had been expecting to spend his life in the military.

The carping started early about Abdullah's poorly pronounced, barracks Arabic—far too much soldier and no poetry. He lacked the deep connection that tied his father to ordinary Jordanians. He even resembled his English mother. The difference was exacerbated by the fact that Prince Hamza, the oldest son of King Hussein with his fourth wife, the American-born Queen Noor, was anointed crown prince. Still a teenager, Hamza had not only inherited his father's dark looks and gravelly voice, but Jordanians told me he and his siblings had been raised with the help of Bedouin nannies who perfected their Arabic. It did not take King Abdullah long to try to minimize the unflattering comparisons by removing his half-brother as crown prince.

People in Jordan complain that the king, relishing the chance to rule, has tried to adopt an almost Saudi style of playing the magnanimous monarch, claiming state assets as his own. Newspaper headlines in the summer of 2008, for example, trumpeted the fact that the king had "donated" forty-five ambulances to Jordanian hospitals. "We have gone from having rights to accepting royal handouts," said Kamhawi, the activist businessman. "This is absurd. The government buys forty-five ambulances and he gives them to the people." A country cannot be built on handouts, Kamhawi added; it needed a solid middle class. Jordan's was shrinking.

Many mocked Abdullah's taste for advertising slogans that allegedly captured the mood of reform, while he avoided doing

anything tangible. On one of my first visits after he took the throne, billboards showing people from various walks of life loomed large. One featured a yuppie in rimless eyeglasses and a tie, the next a village woman with a gold tooth wearing a headscarf and embroidered dress. "Jordan" the advertisements proclaimed in huge, stylized Arabic letters, while smaller script flowing near the bottom quoted an obscure line of medieval poetry that translated loosely as "You reap what you sow." When I asked the supervisor at a roadside restaurant selling grilled chicken near one of the billboards what it meant, he waved his hand dismissively. "Please ask someone else because I have no idea," he told me. "People don't get jobs from what it says on such billboards." If the king wanted to raise the spirit of Jordanians, educated Jordanians outside the royal circle wondered, then why did he go outside the country to hire the London firm of Saatchi & Saatchi to create his advertising campaigns? The king seemed to have absorbed from the West the business model for selling detergent.

The key problem for Jordanians seeking meaningful reform and not advertising slogans, Qudah told me, is finding an outlet under the baleful gaze of the mukhabarat. "You cannot form a political party by reciting poetry," he said, although it's effective for conveying a message, creating the right atmosphere. "If you want to create a reform program you have to take political action."

Political parties were not just reviled but had been banned for decades. Open membership meant jail. They are legal again, but they either are religious or promote failed ideologies like Baathism and Arab Nationalism. None really espouses a vision for a reformed Arab world, Qudah noted, questioning how something like a revived Baath Party can expect to be taken seriously as pushing reform when it declares undying admiration for a bloody despot like Saddam Hussein. The only glimmer of hope, Qudah asserted, is brave dissidents who speak out, but most of them act as individuals rather than

forming organizations. "One day reformers will take the first step down the right road," he said. "Sometimes I think I am one of them and want to be part of that." He and other young Jordanians sit around in each other's homes discussing how they can do something effective, but they have yet to hit upon a solution. Hovering over all such conversations, whether it is spoken or not, is always the cost of any serious effort. "If you work in the daylight you might be imprisoned for a year or two, but you can still come back and work," he said. "But to work in the daylight you have to be very persuasive, serious, honest, and you can't quit as soon as the government offers temptations so you compromise."

The headquarters of Jordan's professional associations is the hub of the unofficial opposition, a role the government has sought to curb. "Engineers should talk about engineering," one former interior minister groused to me. But on any given night some manner of politically tinged seminar unrolls within the building's conference rooms. Once four stories, another three have been pasted atop the original building in a hodge-podge of architectural styles, and dirt streaks run down the entire façade. In a perfunctory stab at native culture, the ground-floor windows are arched and the driveway entrance planted with a row of scraggly palm trees. The exterior is often decorated with giant, grisly posters of Palestinian children or other civilian victims of the Israeli military. If architecture is destiny, the overall effect of disorder outside perfectly reflected the habitual bedlam within.

One night while I was there, the minister of political development showed up to discuss reform. Participants mocked the very name of his ministry as absurd, a prime example of the top-down attempts at reform that are doomed for lack of public participation.

The mukhabarat had sent one of their usual spies to the session—one man at the table with a dark-blue shirt and a black moustache busy scribbling down every word. Qudah, there to give a poetry reading, told me that everyone knew who worked for the secret police. To make his point, as a couple of them left he called out in a jocular manner, "Good, go home so that we can say what we want."

When it came time for the poetry, the difference between Qudah and the others was starkly evident. He was sandwiched between two melodramatic poets lamenting the bloody death of Baghdad as a storied Arab capital. Qudah's poem talked about the eagerly anticipated autumn of Jordan's current political system.

The mukhabarat fortified their central role after both Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel and then King Hussein's 1999 death. While peace diminished the external threat, making the military less important, the mukhabarat was deployed to monitor widespread opposition to the treaty. Then when the king died, having been on the throne for forty-seven years, the mukhabarat helped provide stability and support while his young, green heir found his feet. That support naturally encouraged Abdullah to give credence to the mukhabarat viewpoint that opening up civil and political life would only provide cover for enemies of the state.

Many reformers believe one key reason that Jordan's elected parliament remains so weak is that the mukhabarat interferes not only in elections but how members vote once in office. The GID denies any such interference, but parliament members claim heavy lobbying by the mukhabarat does change votes. Not that they need to sway many opinions. During the years I was working in Jordan, numerous MPs told me that roughly one-third of their number were either former security agents or military officers.

"Some members of parliament allow the mukhabarat to intervene in how they vote because they depend on them for help in getting re-elected," Mahmoud A. al-Kharabsheh, a maverick MP who joined the mukhabarat in 1974 and retired as its head in 1991, told me. "They enter into 90 percent of the political decisions in this country." The mukhabarat can make all the difference in an electoral campaign by getting hundreds of voters to the polls, he and other MPs said, as well as providing access to government jobs for constituents, money, and other facilities. "It's a

carrot and stick. They tell the MPs that whatever they want in the future, they will support them. It is well understood that they will turn against any MP who fails to do what they ask," said Kharabsheh. Jordan's own semi-official National Center for Human Rights criticized much about the election system in its annual report issued in 2008, covering the previous year. It said that the wholesale transfer of registered voters from one district to the next undermined the concept of free and fair elections, and that the new, more restrictive law on political parties would stall their development.

Most resentment toward the mukhabarat stems from their interference in all manner of political issues. "Policy should guide the security services and the security services should not be setting policy," said Hamza Mansour, leader of the Islamic Action Front, the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the country's strongest opposition party. Security police who visited the party headquarters at one point demanded that the organization hang pictures of King Abdullah on the walls. Many organizations saw the hand of the mukhabarat behind the strenuous regulations for getting permits to hold a public meeting and the rules covering public demonstrations. March organizers were told that the only flag that could be waved was the Jordanian flag. No banners were permitted. Raising pictures of King Abdullah was also obligatory and there could be no chanting. The protests would, to outsiders, look like a rally supporting the king. "If no permit was required, there would be a demonstration against the United States and Israel every day and you would not be able to navigate the streets," the GID spokesman told me, defending the list of conditions. "There has to be some sort of system." Political reformers believed that the restrictions were popular among a new class of businessmen grown rich off the war next door in Iraq. They disliked any hint of instability in Jordan.

When any demonstration was deemed problematic, the reaction from the security services was swift and harsh. During one particularly tense period, I attended a Friday prayer sermon whose hundreds of participants planned to march on the Israeli Embassy

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afterward. As the march formed, helmeted riot police wielding clear plastic shields moved in behind a wave of water cannons and tear gas. I sought shelter along with some participants in a nearby apartment building. Police shattered the glass front doors with their heavy wooden batons, then ran up and down the stairs, beating every man or woman in their path.

The head of the GID, the main intelligence agency, reports directly to King Abdullah, whereas the minister of the interior runs the other security agencies. The king sets broad policy guidelines, but leaves it up to the mukhabarat themselves on how they implement them. Some Jordanians find that the secret police involve themselves in even the smallest matters to a degree that leaves people seething with frustration.

Mohamed Atiyeh, a Jordanian businessman, once tried to establish an organization for single parents after his divorce. At first the Ministry of Social Affairs rebuffed the application, saying Jordan had enough private organizations (there were 700), but eventually issued a permit. Then Atiyeh was rejected as the elected president of the board in a decision eventually traced to the Minister of the Interior's secret security arm. Ultimately, approval took seven months. "It was an NGO for single parents, it had nothing to do with politics, and yet they interfered," Atiyeh told me. He thought Jordanian citizens should have the right to know what reports in their secret police files prompt such rejections. "I have never done anything against the society or the government or the regime, so I am still waiting for someone to explain why."

In another incident, Atiyeh and a few friends, in a puckish mood one weekend, decided to decorate a long empty stretch of exterior wall at his house with graffiti. One man wrote a line from the constitution stating that personal freedom is protected. Another wrote "Love is immeasurable." A third wrote "Life comes first." Atiyeh himself wrote an Arab proverb about the absence of choice. Three days later, the secret police summoned him. The officer who questioned him eventually said the graffiti should be painted over because it might be "misinterpreted" by people who

don't care about Jordan's future. Atiyeh stalled for two months, arguing that it was a freedom-of-speech issue, but eventually tired of the constant harassing phone calls.

The head of a newly independent radio station was called by the mukhabarat after it aired a program discussing how a magazine editor had been blocked from taking up his post because he failed to win secret police approval. The officer calling suggested the station not mention the organization on the air again, ever. Indeed, any mention of the mukhabarat or hint at its central role typically brings a rapid slap.

Emad Hajjaj, one of the Arab world's most talented editorial cartoonists, once subtly suggested that the mukhabarat, which he represented as a ghostly disembodied hand, was behind all government appointments. He too was summoned and warned never to mention the organization in a cartoon again. I asked him if he had obeyed the order and he looked surprised, then laughed at my naïveté. "They are the mukhabarat!" said Hajjaj. "We can barely bring ourselves to express our opinions to our wives in our bedrooms and even then we are afraid."

Hajjaj displays on his website, www.mahjoob.com, all the cartoons that have been censored over the years for being politically sensitive. (He stamps each one with a little picture of a woman's slipper, a visual reference drawn from Hajjaj's work that shoes represent oppression—his main recurring character, Abu Mahjoob, uses his wife's slipper to beat her in some cartoons.) The most recent in 2008 was a classified ad suggesting that all of Jordan had been put up for sale to outsiders. (When I started asking around about other censorship examples, several people I interviewed said that a newspaper editor close to the king had called to warn them not to talk to me. The editor insisted my line of questioning was proof that "Neil is an enemy of Jordan.")

Hajjaj was often forced to barter over the wording in his cartoons. The haggling could continue for days, he said, lighting a cigarette. He was once fired from his job at a government-controlled newspaper after drawing a series of cartoons that

mocked the leading cell phone company, among others. "We dream of a free newspaper that the government cannot order around," he told me in his office, decorated with bold primary colors and a life-size cardboard cutout of Abu Mahjoob—a skinny Arab man with a bold chin wearing a checkered red and white headdress.

By the time I dropped in for a coffee in 2008, Hajjaj said he was censoring himself more often, focusing less on political and social reform issues because they elicited such a negative reaction from readers. For much of the year, for example, Arab women had been transfixed by a Turkish soap opera named Noor. The handsome Turkish lead, a man with blue eyes and blond hair named Muhannad, was an unusually sensitive Muslim male who showered his wife Noor with attention. Arab women were completely gaga about the series, and Hajjaj drew a slightly mocking cartoon, suggesting that Muhannad, drawn in a tuxedo, could be as abusive as he wanted toward any of his Arab female fans, represented by an overweight woman with dyed blonde hair. In the bubble over her head, Hajjaj wrote: "She can't vote; she accepts beatings from her husband; she doesn't mind being the fourth wife; she only wants to give birth to sons, not daughters; she gave up her education to get married because that is what tradition demanded." His mobile did not stop ringing the day the cartoon ran, he said, with angry women telling him he was taking the wrong side in the battle between the values of the free world and those of Islam. Women told him they thought that it was in fact OK for their husbands to beat them because the Koran sanctioned it. (That stems from a widely debated interpretation of one key verse from The Women, chapter 4, verse 34.) The conservative Saudi Wahhabi clerics who dominate the increasing number of religious satellite television stations naturally sanction the beating interpretation, Hajjaj told me, and such channels were becoming more and more influential. "You cannot tackle these issues. People were calling to tell me that we had to be frank about how raising issues like human rights and freedom of

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speech were really about confronting Islam," he said. "Defending democracy and human rights is like saying a bad word."

Hajjaj is not alone in censoring himself. There are numerous topics that anger the Royal Court that journalists tend to avoid. They range from the role of the monarchy to the repercussions of the Jordanian-Palestinian split in the population to why some ordinary Jordanians express support for the likes of Osama bin Laden. "Whenever I write or speak, I feel like I am two people," Helmi al-Asmer, a noted columnist in Al-Dustour daily, said while describing how the extensive process of self-censorship works for almost all Jordanian journalists after decades of intimidation by the mukhabarat. "On the one hand I am addressing the readers, but part of me is addressing all the security services watching me."

The GID official told me that his organization was too busy chasing terrorists to monitor the press, but Samir Habashneh, the former interior minister, said he saw nothing wrong with the mukhabarat calling journalists to advise them on how to "explain" the need for certain government policy changes to the public. I went to see Habashneh to get the viewpoint of senior security officials. Sitting out on his balcony with its sweeping panorama of the surrounding hills, sipping small cups of sweet coffee, he said that freedoms taken for granted in democratic countries cannot be practiced in Jordan because it sits, as he put it, "in the eye of a hurricane." With the explosive American occupation of Iraq across one border and frequent violence caused by Israel's long occupation of the West Bank across the other, he felt that Jordan needed to work overtime to ensure its own stability. If the security apparatus relaxed its vigilance and civil liberties including free speech and the right to assemble, and unlicensed political parties were granted without condition, it might easily lead to similarly bloody chaos here, he argued.

It was ironic, given that the Bush administration cited the need for democratic change in the Middle East as a reason for going to war in

Iraq, that the instability there, just across the border, was cited as the reason to curb democratic freedoms in neighboring countries.

In any conversation, senior security officials invariably harkened back to 1970, when the Hashemite dynasty barely held onto its throne by facing down various armed Palestinian factions in pitched battles on Amman's streets. They fear a repeat.

Although Palestinians make up some 50 percent of the roughly 6 million population of Jordan, they have been barred from the security services since 1970. In addition, when the election laws were rewritten in 1993, the parliamentary districts were gerrymandered to prevent heavily Palestinian areas from holding significant numbers of seats. A parliament dominated by Palestinian legislators, senior security officials argued, would likely concentrate so much on Palestinian affairs that Israel would be able to argue that Jordan be designated Palestine. Hence, the argument ran, political reform in Jordan will have to await a solution to the Palestinian crisis. The landslide victory that Hamas won in the Palestinian elections in 2006 spooked Jordan. It postponed election reforms again and tightened rules governing free speech.

A pronounced split in Jordan distinguishes citizens descended from the once nomadic Bedouin tribes who have long inhabited the east side of the Jordan River and the Palestinians, many of them refugees forced there by a series of wars, particularly the 1967 war when Jordan lost the West Bank to Israel. Broadly speaking, the Jordanians fill the ranks of the armed services, while the Palestinians run much of the private sector. Both sides resent what they see as unwarranted privileges given to the other. Some of the most conservative Jordanians object to Palestinians getting passports, suggesting they be treated as they are in the Gulf states where they often formed the nucleus of the technocrat class—granted residency but rarely citizenship. Certainly none should be allowed to serve in the Cabinet or other top government posts.

During the years when all political activity was banned outright, the tension between the two sides crystallized in the fierce rivalry between two competing soccer clubs: al-Faisaly, dominated by

native Jordanians, and al-Wihdat, whose players are mostly of Palestinian descent. The latter name comes from one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps. After King Abdullah took the throne, Faisaly supporters taunted their rivals in the stadium by chanting for him to divorce his wife, Queen Rania, because she is of Palestinian descent. "Hiya min wein? Hiya min wein? Tala'ha Tala'ha, Ya Abu Hussein," went the rhyming chant, which means "Where's she from? Where's she from? Divorce her, divorce her, Oh father of Hussein." (Both Abdullah's father and oldest son were named Hussein.) They also chanted for Israel to strengthen its army.

Jordanians pushing for reform, especially the young like Qudah, dismissed the whole security argument surrounding the question of Palestine as just a pretext for those in power to hang on indefinitely. They sometimes joked darkly that the government did back one strong political party—the mukhabarat. Nothing underscored the limits on freedom more than the fact that Qudah was once imprisoned for a work of political art. The poem he recited in August 1996, which criticized the way "The Manager" ran an unidentified country, had lines like these:

He has never taken any decision
Without asking for the public's permission
Or without a public referendum.
What a public!
Whenever something urgent comes up
The public assembles
Then there is a comprehensive speech, whipped up by
The Manager
Followed by a ululation and a blessing
And the auction is open for whistling, drumming and
for honking
And afterwards, the audience claps

And this is the consensus in my state
And this is freedom of expression.

Qudah had been invited to recite poetry at the annual convention for Jordanian dentists, which was held that year inside the historic tower castle of Ajloun, his hometown. His ten-day interrogation, though civil, focused on his goal in reading the poem, whether he was trying to incite an anti-government rebellion and whether he belonged to any subversive organization. Qudah believed his jail sentence from the State Security Court was pre-ordained from the moment he was charged with "italat lisaan," which in Arabic literally means "elongation of the tongue," but translates as slander or defamation. He spent a year at Swaigah prison in the southern desert playing soccer with other inmates and leading discussions on the need for political and social change, he told me. "That year just deepened my sense that reform is necessary and made me want to challenge the system more."

Trouble with the security services creates a ripple effect. Qudah wrote enough poetry to publish four collections, but got permission to distribute only one book finally in 2008. The book consisted of mostly love poetry. The few poems that were political dealt with the Arab-Israeli dispute or other regional subjects. Qudah has never been invited to recite at official festivals, although Jordanian critics call his work witty and subtle. "If you were the most important writer in the world, you couldn't get published in any Jordanian newspaper without the consent of the secret police," he said. "Whereas if you become their ally, you would get a very prominent column."

By the time I caught up with him again in 2008, drinking beers during a hotel happy hour while he smoked a cigar, Qudah had developed even deeper scorn for the state-controlled radio and Jordanian television. It was being used to create a personality cult around King Abdullah, he said, with songs lauding the monarch set against videotapes showing him shaking hands with President Bush or delivering aid to poor people. "We might be the only country in the world where you turn on the radio and don't hear any songs

about love or girls. We only sing about the government and the king," he said, grimacing. "It's disgusting. If you are driving in your car you can't turn the radio to a Jordanian station because that is all you will hear."

(Defamation of the king or the royal family can bring a jail sentence of up to three years. Perceived slights crop up in the oddest places. Suha Maayeh, the Jordanian reporter I worked with frequently, told me she was admonished by a traffic police officer not to wear her Victoria Beckham–designed jeans because the rear pockets were decorated with a crown.)

Qudah thought he stayed behind bars for merely twenty-four hours after reciting the poem questioning the honor of Arab leaders because an important cousin intervened. Qudah is a member of a sprawling Jordanian clan, a significant government ally, and his cousin represented their hometown of Ajloun in parliament. He took me to meet Falah al-Qudah, who argued that the fact that Sameer spent a year in jail for the first poem and just one night for the second proved that the mukhabarat was becoming progressive. "They were more sympathetic the second time because they realized that he didn't threaten the state's security," he told me, adding that he supported the idea that the security services maintain vigilance at all times. As soon as we were out in the office hallway and his cousin was out of earshot, Qudah shook his head, noting that the legislator spoke for roughly an hour about reform without really proposing anything concrete.

Qudah told me that the problems with the opposition in Jordan stem from both a lack of organization and a clearly defined demand to pursue. "If you are going to be thrown into jail anyway, you might as well make big demands," he said. He wanted to see an organized opposition party that pushed for major, specific demands, like appointing the prime minister from among the elected members of parliament. He then reeled off a long checklist of the building blocks of democracy—freedom, transparency, equal opportunity within the democratic process, social justice, strong institutions, and the rule of law. "Everyone should be subject

to the constitution and the rule of law." He doubted that the current system will ever change itself, in Jordan or anywhere else in the region. Yet greater political openness should be the demand of any Arab with a brain, he argued. "To respect your own intelligence means you cannot accept the way things carry on in the Arab world," he said. "We live a big official lie that everything is fine in the Arab world, which nobody should accept." Some activists think it will come only with a stronger economy, which would embolden a presumably larger middle class to demand that the mukhabarat not interfere with their lives. Ideally a middle class would want real laws that stick, not hidden laws promulgated by the secret police.

There are times when Qudah thinks about escaping politics, just kicking back and watching European soccer on television or hanging out with his wife, but he is always sucked back in. "If you have stability but life is desperate, what does that bring you?" Qudah says. "We Arabs, all of us, are marrying, drinking, laughing, making love. So why can't we live in a free environment? Why can't our freedom just be one aspect among many in our lives? Why do we have to wait? What for? We have been waiting for more than fifty years."

Like many Arabs seeking reform, Qudah was torn by the United States pushing the issue. American economic and military aid to Jordan expanded to more than $650 million in 2008, giving Washington considerable leverage. On the one hand, he thought outside pressure helped bring change, but relying on the U.S. for such pressure was a bitter choice given that it is generally seen as hostile to Arab interests. He also found a certain hypocrisy in the brief American attempt to demand reform. "They gave the green light to all these Arab leaders to create police states, then the reaction to all these police states was religious extremism," Qudah said. "You raise someone for fifty years to go the wrong way down a one-way street and then suddenly tell them that they have to respect the law."

babism over the entire population, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud renamed the Arabian Peninsula "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The primitive tribe of the Najd and their fundamentalist allies had become the Wardens of the Sanctuary, the Keepers of the Keys.

START → Almost immediately, the sacred land where Muhammad had received the gift of revelation miraculously burst forth with another gift from God—oil—giving the tiny Saudi clan sudden dominion over the world's economy. They now felt it was up to them to respond to this blessing from God by spreading their puritanical doctrine to the rest of the world and purging the Muslim faith once and for all of its religious and ethnic diversity.

The Muslim Brothers arrived in Saudi Arabia at an opportune time. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remained the sole Muslim country in which the Ulama had not lost their grip over society. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia was both an utterly totalitarian and an uncompromisingly Wahhabist state. Here there was no debate between Modernists and Islamists; there was no debate whatsoever. Nationalism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, Islamic socialism—none of these vibrant and influential movements in the Muslim world had a significant voice in the Saudi kingdom. The only doctrine that was tolerated was Wahhabi doctrine; the only ideology, Islamic fundamentalism. Any deviation was violently suppressed.

No wonder the Saudi monarchy viewed Nasser's secular nationalism as a direct threat to their way of life. As the man who defied the West by nationalizing the Suez Canal, Nasser had achieved near-mythic status not only in the Muslim world but in most other third-world countries. In the Middle East, Nasser embodied the last gasp of Pan-Arabism. His Arab socialist vision, though failing miserably in Egypt, was regarded by many Muslims as the sole alternative to the spread of Westoxification. So great was his charisma, and so successful his brutal suppression of opposition, that by the 1960s, his authority was unchallenged in every sector of Egyptian society.

Hoping to curb Nasser's growing influence in the Muslim world, the Saudi monarchy opened its arms to the radicalized Muslim Brothers—not just those who had been exiled from Egypt, but also those from other secular Arab states like Syria and Iraq. The Saudis offered

all the money, support, and security the Brothers needed to fight back against secular nationalism in their home countries. But the Muslim Brothers discovered more than shelter in Saudi Arabia. They discovered Wahhabism; and they were not alone. Hundreds of thousands of poor workers from all over the Muslim world began pouring into Saudi Arabia to work the oil fields. By the time they returned to their homes, they were fully indoctrinated in Saudi religiosity.

Religious adherence to the Saudi model became the prerequisite for receiving government subsidies and contracts. The vast sums the Saudis paid to various Muslim charities, the foundations they established, the mosques, universities, and primary schools they built—everything the Saudis did was inextricably linked to Wahhabism. In 1962, their missionary efforts gained momentum with the creation of the Muslim World League, whose primary goal was the spread of Wahhabi ideology to the rest of the Muslim world. This was, in effect, the new Islamic expansion, except that these tribal warriors did not need to leave the Arabian Peninsula to conquer their neighbors; their neighbors came to them. As Keepers of the Keys, the Saudis controlled the Hajj pilgrimage, to the chagrin of most Muslims who considered them little more than a crude band of unsophisticated fundamentalists. With billions of dollars spent to modernize and expand the pilgrimage festivities so as to ensure maximum participation, nearly a million Muslims inundate the bare Meccan valley every year.

Since the creation of the Muslim World League, the simplicity, certainty, and unconditional morality of Wahhabism have infiltrated every corner of the Muslim world. Thanks to Saudi evangelism, Wahhabi doctrine has dramatically affected the religio-political ideologies of the Muslim Brothers, Mawdudi's Islamic Association, the Palestinian Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, to name only a few groups. The Saudis have become the patrons of a new kind of Pan-Islamism: one based on the austere, uncompromising, and extremist ideology of Islamic fundamentalism, which has become a powerful voice in deciding the future of the Islamic state.

Of course, the problem with fundamentalism is that it is by definition a reactionary movement; it cannot remain tied to power. The Saudi kingdom discovered this from the very beginning when, sud-

denly flush with money, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud began using his newly-found wealth to build a life befitting a king. Soon Saudi Arabia was awash in modern technology bought from the West. The elaborate process of extracting oil from the desert required the presence of hundreds of foreign nationals—mostly British and American—who brought to Arabia an unfamiliar yet alluring culture of materialism. So close was Abd al-Aziz to the British Empire that he was even knighted by the Queen. In short, the king had been Westoxified and, as a result, turned his back on the Wahhabi warriors—now dubbed the *Ikhwan*, or "brothers" (not to be confused with the Muslim Brothers)—who had helped place him in power.

In 1929, the Ikhwan, angered by the greed and corruption of the Saudi court, launched a rebellion in the city of al-Salba. They demanded that the king renounce his materialism and expel the foreign infidels from the holy land. In response, Abd al-Aziz sent an army to al-Salba and massacred the Ikhwan.

However, Saudi Arabia quickly discovered what the rest of the world would soon learn. Fundamentalism, in all religious traditions, is impervious to suppression. The more one tries to squelch it, the stronger it becomes. Counter it with cruelty, and it gains adherents. Kill its leaders, and they become martyrs. Respond with despotism, and it becomes the sole voice of opposition. Try to control it, and it will turn against you. Try to appease it, and it will take control.

In 1991, during the Persian Gulf War to expel Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army from Kuwait, a small group of Saudi dissidents calling themselves *al-Qaeda* took up the original revolutionary ideology of Wahhabism and turned against the Saudi royal family, whom they considered to be a corrupt bunch of gluttonous degenerates who had sold the interests of the Muslim community to foreign powers. In true Kharijite fashion, al-Qaeda divided the Muslim world into "the People of Heaven" (themselves) and "the People of Hell" (everyone else).

The sinful actions of the Saudi princes have, in al-Qaeda's view, made them members of the latter group—apostates who must be punished by excommunication from the holy community of God. And it is not just the Saudi royal family that al-Qaeda has targeted. All Muslims whose interpretation of scripture and observance of the Shariah do

not fit in the Wahhabi model are considered infidels. Consequently, as al-Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, has promised, "They shall be wiped out!"

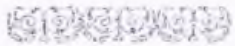
Despite the tragedy of September 11 and the subsequent terrorist acts against Western targets throughout the world, despite the clash-of-civilizations mentality that has seized the globe and the clash-of-monotheisms reality underlying it, despite the blatant religious rhetoric resonating throughout the halls of governments, there is one thing that cannot be overemphasized. What is taking place now in the Muslim world is an internal conflict between Muslims, not an external battle between Islam and the West. The West is merely a bystander—an unwary yet complicit casualty of a rivalry that is raging in Islam over who will write the next chapter in its story.

All great religions grapple with these issues, some more fiercely than others. One need only recall Europe's massively destructive Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) between the forces of the Protestant Union and those of the Catholic League to recognize the ferocity with which interreligious conflicts have been fought in Christian history. In many ways, the Thirty Years' War signaled the end of the Reformation: perhaps the classic argument over who gets to decide the future of a faith. What followed that awful war during which nearly a third of the population of Germany perished was a gradual progression in Christian theology from the doctrinal absolutism of the pre-Reformation era to the doctrinal pluralism of the early modern period and, ultimately, to the doctrinal relativism of the Enlightenment. This remarkable evolution in Christianity from its inception to its Reformation took fifteen vicious, bloody, and occasionally apocalyptic centuries.

Fourteen hundred years of rabid debate over what it means to be a Muslim; of passionate arguments over the interpretation of the Quran and the application of Islamic law; of trying to reconcile a fractured community through appeals to Divine Unity; of tribal feuds, crusades, and world wars—and Islam has finally begun its fifteenth century.

10. Slouching Toward Medina

THE ISLAMIC REFORMATION



"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful," the IranAir pilot intones as our plane glides to a stop at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. There is a nervous shifting in the seats around me. The women sit upright, adjusting their headscarves, making sure their ankles and wrists are properly covered, while their husbands rub the sleep from their eyes and begin gathering the belongings their children have scattered in the aisle.

I lift my head to look for the two or three faces I have been carefully observing since boarding the plane in London. They are the younger, single passengers on board, men and women who, like me, are in their late twenties or early thirties. They are dressed in ill-fitting clothes that look as though they were purchased in secondhand stores—awkward long-sleeved shirts; dull slacks; unadorned head scarves—all meant to appear as inoffensive as possible. I know this

because this is precisely how I am dressed. When I catch their eyes, I can see a glint of the same anxiety that courses through my body. It is a mixture of fear and excitement. For many of us, this will be the first time we have set foot in the country of our birth since the revolution forced us from it as children.

As part of an effort to reach out to the massive Iranian Diaspora who fled to Europe and the United States in the early 1980s, the Iranian government recently issued a tentative amnesty to all expatriates, announcing that they could return to Iran for brief visits—once a year and not to exceed three months—without fear of being detained or forced into completing their mandatory military duty. The response was immediate. Thousands of young Iranians began pouring into the country. Some had never known Iran except through the nostalgic tales of their parents. Others like me had been born in Iran but were spirited away when we were still too young to make decisions of our own.

We disembark and slip into the steamy early morning. It is still dark, but already the airport is bursting with arrivals from Paris, Milan, Berlin, Los Angeles. A raucous crowd has gathered at passport control in nothing resembling a proper line. Babies scream. An unbearable odor of sweat and cigarette smoke wafts through the air. Elbows jab me from all sides. And suddenly I am flooded with memories of this very same airport many years ago; of linking arms with my family and shoving our way through a frantic mob, trying to leave Iran before the borders closed and the airplanes were grounded. I remember my mother crying out, "Don't lose your sister!" I can still hear the terrifying breathlessness of her voice, as though she were warning me that if I let go of my little sister's hand, she would be left behind. I gripped her fingers so tightly she began to cry, and dragged her roughly toward the gate, kicking at the knees around us to make way.

Two decades and four suffocatingly long hours later, I am finally at the passport window. I slip my documents through a slot in the glass to a young, lightly bearded man in broken spectacles. He flips through the pages absentmindedly while I prepare my well-rehearsed replies as to who I am and why I am here.

"What is your point of origin?" the agent asks wearily.

"The United States," I reply.

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He stiffens and looks up at my face. I can tell we are the same age, though his tired eyes and his unshaven jowl make him appear much older. He is a child of the revolution; I am a fugitive—an apostate. He has spent his life surviving a history that I have spent my life studying from afar. All at once I feel overwhelmed. I can barely look at him when he asks, "Where have you been?" as all passport agents are required to do. I cannot help but sense the accusation in his question.

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On the day Khomeini returned to Iran, I took my four-year-old sister by the hand and, despite my mother's warning not to venture outdoors, led her out of our apartment in downtown Tehran to join the celebrations in the streets. It had been days since we had gone outside. The weeks preceding the Shah's exile and the Ayatollah's return had been violent ones. The schools were closed, most television and radio stations shut down, and our quiet, suburban neighborhood deserted. So when we looked out our window on that February morning and saw the euphoria in the streets, nothing could have kept us inside.

Filling a plastic pitcher with Tang and stealing two packages of Dixie cups from our mother's cupboard, my sister and I sneaked out to join the revelry. One by one we filled the cups and passed them out to the crowd. Strangers stopped to lift us up and kiss our cheeks. Handfuls of sweets were thrown from open windows. There was music and dancing everywhere. I wasn't really sure what we were celebrating, but I didn't care. I was swept up in the moment and enthralled by the strange words on everyone's lips—words I had heard before but which were still mystifying and unexplained: Freedom! Liberty! Democracy!

A few months later, the promise of those words seemed about to be fulfilled when Iran's provisional government drafted a constitution for the newly formed and thrillingly titled Islamic Republic of Iran. Under Khomeini's guidance, the constitution was a combination of third-world anti-imperialism mixed with the socioeconomic theories of legendary Iranian ideologues like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, the religio-political philosophies of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, and traditional Shi'ite populism. Its founding articles promised equality of the sexes, religious pluralism, social justice, freedom of speech, and the right to peaceful assembly—all the lofty principles the

revolution had fought to attain—while simultaneously affirming the Islamic character of the new republic.

In some ways, Iran's new constitution did not differ markedly from the one written after the country's first anti-imperialist revolution in 1905, except that this constitution appeared to envisage *two* governments. The first, representing the sovereignty of the people, included a popularly elected president who would serve as the executive of a highly centralized state, a parliament charged with creating and debating laws, and an independent judiciary to interpret those laws. The second, representing the sovereignty of God, consisted of just one man: the Ayatollah Khomeini.

This was the Valayat-e Faqih that Khomeini had been writing about furtively during his years of exile in France. In theory, the Faqih is the most learned religious authority in the country, whose primary function is to ensure the Islamic quality of the state. Yet through the machinations of Iran's powerful clerical establishment, the Faqih was transformed from a symbolic moral authority into the supreme political authority in the state. The constitution provided the Faqih with the power to appoint the head of the judiciary, to be commander in chief of the army, to dismiss the president, and to veto all laws created by the parliament. Originally intended to reconcile popular and divine sovereignty, the Valayat-e Faqih had suddenly paved the way for the institutionalization of absolute clerical control.

Still, Iranians were too elated by their newfound independence, and too blinded by the conspiracy theories floating in the air about another attempt by the CIA and the U.S. embassy in Tehran to reestablish the Shah on his throne (just as they had done in 1953), to recognize the dire implications of the new constitution. Despite warnings from the provisional government and the vociferous arguments of Khomeini's rival ayatollahs, particularly the Ayatollah Shariatmadari (whom Khomeini eventually stripped of his religious credentials despite centuries of Shi'ite law forbidding such actions), the draft was approved in a national referendum by over 98 percent of the electorate.

By the time most Iranians realized what they had voted for, Saddam Hussein, encouraged by the United States and furnished with

chemical and biological materials by the Centers for Disease Control and the Virginia-based company the American Type Culture Collection, launched an attack on Iranian soil. As happens in times of war, all dissenting voices were silenced in the interest of national security, and the dream that had given rise to revolution a year earlier gave way to the reality of a totalitarian state plagued by the gross ineptitude of a ruling clerical régime wielding unconditional religious and political authority.

The intention of the United States government in supporting Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war was to curb the spread of Iran's revolution, but it had the more disastrous effect of curbing its evolution. It was not until the end of the war in 1988 and the death of Khomeini a year later that the democratic ideals embedded in Iran's constitution were gradually unearthed by a new generation of Iranians too young to remember the tyranny of the Shah but old enough to realize that the present system was not what their parents had fought for. It was their discontent that fueled the activities of a handful of reformist academics, politicians, philosophers, and theologians who embarked on a new revolution in Iran, not to secularize the country but to refocus it on genuine Islamic values like pluralism, freedom, justice, human rights, and above all, democracy. As Abdolkarim Soroush, the foremost Muslim political philosopher in Iran, has defiantly remarked, "We no longer claim that a genuinely religious government can be democratic, but that it cannot be otherwise."

In the half century since the end of colonialism and the founding of the Islamic state, Islam has been invoked to legitimize and to overturn governments, to promote republicanism and defend authoritarianism, to justify monarchies, autocracies, oligarchies, and theocracies, and to promote terrorism, factionalism, and hostility. The question remains: Can Islam now be used to establish a genuinely liberal democracy in the Middle East? Can a modern Islamic state reconcile reason and Revelation to create a democratic society based on the ethical ideals established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina nearly fifteen centuries ago?

Not only can it do so, it *must*. Indeed, it is already doing so in Iran and in other parts of the Muslim world. But it is a process that can be

based only on Islamic traditions and values. The principal lesson to be learned from the failure of Europe's "civilizing mission" is that democracy, if it is to be viable and enduring, can never be imported. It must be nurtured from within, founded upon familiar ideologies, and presented in a language that is both comprehensible and appealing to the indigenous population.

Iran's previous revolutions in 1905 and 1953 were hijacked by foreigners whose interests were served by suppressing democracy in the region. The revolution of 1979 was hijacked by the country's own clerical establishment, who used their moral authority to gain absolute power. This counterrevolution, however, despite the brutally intransigent response it has thus far received from Iran's clerical oligarchy, must not be quelled. That is because the fight for Islamic democracy in Iran is merely one front in a worldwide battle taking place in the Muslim world—a jihad, if you will—to strip the Traditionalist Ulama of their monopoly over the meaning and message of Islam and pave the way for the realization of the long-awaited and hard-fought Islamic Reformation.

This is an internal struggle taking place not in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, where the Islamic message was first introduced to the world, but in the developing capitals of the Muslim world—Tehran, Cairo, Damascus, and Jakarta—and in the cosmopolitan capitals of Europe and the United States—New York, London, Paris, and Berlin—where that message is being redefined by scores of first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants. By merging the Islamic values of their ancestors with the democratic ideals of their new homes, these Muslims have formed what Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born intellectual and grandson of Hasan al-Banna, has termed the "mobilizing force" for the Islamic Reformation.

Like the reformations of the past, this will be a terrifying event, one that has already begun to engulf the world. However, out of the ashes of cataclysm, a new chapter in the story of Islam will emerge. And while it remains to be seen who will write that chapter, even now across the Muslim world a new revelation is at hand which, after centuries of stony sleep, has finally awoken and is slouching toward Medina to be born.

WITH THE END of the Second World War, a victorious yet financially devastated Britain, no longer able to bear the cost or justify the ideology of its colonial enterprise in India, finally granted to the greatest symbol of its imperialist ambitions—the jewel in the crown of its dwindling empire—its long-sought independence. On August 14, 1947, three hundred fifty years of colonial rule in India came to an end. Yet the day that C. E. Trevelyan predicted would be "the proudest monument of British benevolence," when, "endowed with [British] learning and political institutions," India would represent colonialism's greatest triumph, became the day in which the fractious population of the Subcontinent was violently partitioned along religious lines into a predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.

In many ways, the partition of India was the inevitable result of three centuries of Britain's divide-and-rule policy. As the events of the Indian Revolt demonstrated, the British believed that the best way to curb nationalist sentiment was to classify the indigenous population not as Indians, but as Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, etc. The categorization and separation of native peoples was a common tactic for maintaining colonial control over territories whose national boundaries had been arbitrarily drawn with little consideration for the ethnic, cultural, or religious makeup of the local inhabitants. The French went to great lengths to cultivate class divisions in Algeria, the Belgians promoted tribal factionalism in Rwanda, and the British fostered sectarian schisms in Iraq, all in a futile attempt to minimize nationalist tendencies and stymie united calls for independence. No wonder, then, that when the colonialists were finally expelled from these manufactured states, they left behind not only economic and political turmoil, but deeply divided populations with little common ground on which to construct a national identity.

The partition of India was not simply the result of an internal feud between Muslims and Hindus. Nor was it an isolated event. Indonesia's numerous secessionist movements, the bloody border disputes between Morocco and Algeria, the fifty-year civil war in Sudan between Arab northerners and Black African southerners, the partitioning of Palestine

and the resulting cycle of violence, the warring ethnic factions in Iraq and the genocide of nearly a million Tutsis at the hands of the Hutus in Rwanda, to name but a handful of cases, have all been in considerable measure a result of the decolonization process.

When Britain abandoned India with an overwhelming Hindu majority holding most of the economic, social, and political power in the country, the Muslim minority, educated by the British in the persuasive rhetoric of democracy, came to the conclusion that the only possible means of achieving autonomy was through Muslim self-determination. Hence, the birth of the Islamic state.

Yet beyond the call for self-determination, there was little else that India's Muslim community agreed upon with regard to the role of Islam in the state. For Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's reluctant founder, Islam was merely the common heritage that could unite India's diverse Muslim population into a united state. Jinnah regarded Islam in the same way that Gandhi regarded Hinduism—as a unifying cultural symbol, not as a religio-political ideology. For Mawlana Mawdudi, Pakistan's ideological instigator, the state was merely the vehicle for the realization of Islamic law. Mawdudi regarded Islam as the antithesis to secular nationalism and believed Pakistan would be the first step toward the establishment of a Muslim world-state. While the Muslim League, Pakistan's largest political party, argued that the Islamic state must receive its mandate from its citizens, the Islamic Association, Pakistan's largest Islamist organization, countered that the state could be considered Islamic only if sovereignty rested solely in the hands of God.

In the wake of the chaos and bloodshed that followed the partition of India, as some seventeen million people—the largest human migration in history—fled across fractured borders in both directions, neither Jinnah's nor Mawdudi's vision of the Islamic state was realized. Despite the drafting of a constitution that envisioned a parliament elected to write the laws and a judiciary appointed to decide whether those laws were in accord with Islamic principles, Pakistan quickly gave way to military dictatorship at the hands of Ayub Khan. Khan's régime lasted until 1977, when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's platform of Islamic socialism made him Pakistan's first freely elected civilian ruler since partition. But Bhutto's socialist reforms, though popular with

the people, were denounced as un-Islamic by extremist members of Pakistan's Muslim clergy, clearing the way for the military coup of General Zia al-Haq. With the help of the religious authorities, Zia enacted a forced Islamization process in which Islam became both public morality and civil law. After Zia's death in 1985, a new wave of elections resulted in the reformist governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, both of whom expounded a more liberal ideal of Islam in order to tap into Pakistan's frustration with nearly a decade of brutal fundamentalism. But in 1999, after accusing the elected government of corruption, the head of Pakistan's army, Pervez Musharraf, imposed yet another military dictatorship on the country. All this in a span of fifty years.

The experience of Pakistan serves as a reminder that the Islamic state is by no means a monolithic concept. Indeed, there are many countries in the modern world that could be termed Islamic states, none of which have much in common with each other. Egypt is an autocracy posing as a republic, with a president for life and an impotent parliament. Syria is an Arab dictatorship whose ruler serves at the pleasure of its all-powerful military. Jordan and Morocco are volatile kingdoms whose young monarchs have made timid steps toward democratization, though without forfeiting their absolute rule. Iran is a fascist country run by a corrupt clerical oligarchy committed to snuffing out any attempts at democratic reform. Saudi Arabia is a fundamentalist theocracy whose only constitution is the Quran and whose only law is the Shariah. And yet not only do all of these countries view themselves as the realization of the Medinan ideal, they view each other as contemptible desecrations of that ideal.

But if one were truly to rely on the Medinan ideal to define the nature and function of the Islamic state, it would have to be characterized as nothing more than the nationalist manifestation of the Ummah. At its most basic level, the Islamic state is a state run by Muslims for Muslims, in which the determination of values, the norms of behavior, and the formation of laws are influenced by Islamic morality. At the same time, minority faiths would be protected from harm and allowed complete social and political participation in the community, just as they were in Medina. In the same way that the Revelation was dictated by the needs of the Ummah, so would all legal and moral

considerations be determined by the citizens of the Islamic state. For as Abu Bakr so wisely stated upon succeeding the Prophet, Muslim allegiance is owed not to a president, prime minister, priest, king, or any earthly authority, but to the community and to God. As long as these criteria, which the Prophet established in Medina nearly fifteen centuries ago and which the Rightly Guided Caliphs struggled in their own way to preserve, are satisfied, then what form the Islamic state takes is irrelevant.

So, then, why not democracy?

Representative democracy may be the greatest social and political experiment in the history of the world. But it is an ever-evolving experiment. These days there is a tendency to regard American democracy as the model for all the world's democracies, and in some ways this is true. The seeds of democracy may have been sown in ancient Greece, but it is in American soil that they sprouted and flourished. Yet precisely for this reason, only in America is American democracy possible; it cannot be isolated from American traditions and values.

The fact is that the vast majority of the more than one billion Muslims in the world readily accept the fundamental principles of democracy. Thanks to the efforts of Modernists like Muhammad Abdu, most Muslims have appropriated the language of democracy into Islamic terms, recognizing shura as popular representation, ijma as political participation, bay'ah as universal suffrage. Democratic ideals such as constitutionalism, government accountability, pluralism, and human rights are widely accepted throughout the Muslim world. What is not necessarily accepted, however, is the distinctly Western notion that religion and the state should be entirely separate, that secularism must be the foundation of a democratic society.

Islam, as Sayyid Qutb aptly noted, has always been more than religion; it is, in al-Afghani's observation, civilization. It is the dynamic conviction that a person's spiritual and worldly responsibilities are one and the same, that an individual's duty to the community is indistinguishable from his or her duty to God. From the creation of the first Islamic civil order in Medina, Islam has endeavored not merely to prevent vice but to encourage virtue, not merely to satisfy the needs of the people but to satisfy the will of God. And since a state can be con-

sidered democratic only insofar as it reflects its society, if the society is founded upon a particular set of values, then must not its government be also?

Admittedly, ever since September 11 it has been impossible to ask such questions without immediately conjuring up pictures of Afghanistan under the Taliban. In fact, the image of the Afghan woman enveloped in the *burqah* and subjugated to the whims of an ignorant band of misogynists has become the symbol of everything that is backward and wicked about the concept of Islamic governance, and such images are not easily supplanted by political philosophies.

IN THE FALL of 1996, a group of ethnic Pashtun religious students from the poorest, most conservative, and least literate provinces of Afghanistan and Pakistan rolled uncontested into Kabul, hoisting their trademark white flag representing purity. The students stormed the United Nations compound where Afghanistan's president was hiding, dragged him into the streets, pummeled him to death, and, at dawn, hung his bloated body from a lamppost. In this way the *Taliban* made its fearsome presence known to the world.

The Taliban first entered the global stage along with a massive contingent of Muslim militants—known as the *Mujahadin*, or "those who wage jihad"—from the Middle and Far East, Central and Southeast Asia, and North and East Africa, who from 1982 to 1992 were recruited and armed by the CIA to take part in a jihadist insurrection against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. With Saudi funding, the Mujahadin were sent to Pakistan where, with the assistance of Zia al-Haq's fundamentalist régime, they were trained in terror tactics and indoctrinated with a militant combination of Shah Wali Allah's religio-political ideology and Wahhabism's radical puritanism, all under the supervision of then CIA chief William Casey.

The United States had long considered Wahhabism to be an important ally in the "Great Game" being played out against "godless Communism." In fact, to solidify Saudi support, the United States took the extra step of drafting a wealthy Saudi student with intimate ties to the royal family, Osama bin Laden, to finance and oversee the insurrection in Afghanistan. Called "freedom fighters" by the CIA

and compared to America's founding fathers by President Ronald Reagan, the combined force of the foreign Mujahadin fighters and the Afghani and Pakistani religious students not only forced the Soviet army to pull out of Afghanistan, they ushered in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Their mission in Afghanistan accomplished, the triumphant Mujahadin took their Pakistani training, their Saudi fundamentalism, and their American weapons back to their home countries in order to launch their own jihads in places like Palestine, Chechnya, Morocco, and Indonesia. The Taliban returned to their homes in the Pashtun regions near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan to continue their religious education. And Afghanistan, abandoned by a United States flushed with victory in the Cold War, was left in the hands of lawless warlords who ran the country like competing Mafia gangs—killing, torturing, and raping indiscriminately in their quest for control.

In 1992, when the Taliban decided to reunite under the leadership of their spiritual teacher, Mullah Omar, and retake Afghanistan, this time from the hands of the feuding warlords, they were again supported by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. With the assistance of Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence agency), the Taliban secured their home region of Kandahar in 1993. Two years later, they captured the Shi'ite city of Herat, and by 1996 they controlled the capital city of Kabul. With more than three fourths of the country under their control, they then began a now infamous Wahhabization process throughout Afghanistan in which all religious sites—Muslim and non-Muslim—were destroyed, tobacco and coffee outlawed, men compelled to grow beards, women forced into seclusion, and the country's substantial Shi'ite and Sufi populations massacred.

Considering how often Islam has been used to rationalize the brutal policies of oppressive totalitarian régimes like the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia, or the Faqih in Iran, it is hardly surprising that the term "Islamic democracy" provokes such skepticism in the West. Some of the most celebrated academics in the United States and Europe reject the notion outright, believing that the principles of democracy cannot be reconciled with fundamental Islamic values. When politicians speak of bringing democracy to the

Middle East, they mean specifically an American secular democracy, not an indigenous Islamic one. And dictatorial régimes in the Middle East never seem to tire of preaching to the world that their brutally antidemocratic policies are justified because "fundamentalists" allow them but two possible options: despotism or theocracy. The problem with democracy from their point of view is that if people are allowed a choice, they may choose against their governments. So, in Algeria, free democratic elections have been suspended whenever it seemed imminent that they would be won by an Islamist party, while in Egypt, a permanent application of the country's emergency laws has made free elections inconceivable, lest groups like the Muslim Brothers be given a voice in the government.

Ignoring for a moment the role these and so many other autocratic régimes in the Middle East have played in creating Muslim extremism in the first place through their antidemocratic policies, there exists a far more philosophical dispute in the Western world with regard to the concept of Islamic democracy: that is, that there can be no *a priori* moral framework in a modern democracy; that the foundation of a genuinely democratic society must be secularism. The problem with this argument, however, is that it not only fails to recognize the inherently moral foundation upon which a large number of modern democracies are built, it more importantly fails to appreciate the difference between *secularism* and *secularization*.

As the Protestant theologian Harvey Cox notes, secularization is the process by which "certain responsibilities pass from ecclesiastical to political authorities," whereas secularism is an ideology based on the eradication of religion from public life. Secularization implies a historical evolution in which society gradually frees itself from "religious control and closed metaphysical world-views." Secularism is itself a closed metaphysical world-view which, according to Cox, "functions very much like a new religion."

Turkey is a secular country in which outward signs of religiosity such as the *hijab* are forcibly suppressed. With regard to ideological resolve, one could argue that there is little that separates a secular country like Turkey from a religious country like Iran; both ideologize society. The United States, however, is a secularizing country, unapologetically founded on a Judeo-Christian—and more precisely

Protestant—moral framework. As recognized nearly two hundred years ago by Alexis de Tocqueville, religion is the foundation of America's political system. It not only reflects American social values, it very often dictates them. One need only regard the language with which political issues like abortion rights and gay marriage are debated in Congress to recognize that religion is to this day an integral part of the American national identity and patently the moral foundation for its Constitution, its laws, and its national customs. Despite what schoolchildren read in their history books, the reality is that the separation of "Church and State" is not so much the foundation of American government as it is the result of a two-hundred-fifty-year secularization process based not upon secularism, but upon *pluralism*.

It is pluralism, not secularism, that defines democracy. A democratic state can be established upon any normative moral framework as long as pluralism remains the source of its legitimacy. The State of Israel is founded upon an exclusivist Jewish moral framework that recognizes all the world's Jews—regardless of their nationality—as citizens of the state. England continues to maintain a national church whose religious head is also the country's sovereign. India was, until recently, governed by partisans of an élitist theology of Hindu Awakening (*Hindutva*) bent on applying their implausible but enormously successful vision of "true Hinduism" to the state. And yet, like the United States, these countries are all considered democracies, not because they are secular but because they are, at least in theory, dedicated to pluralism.

Islam has had a long commitment to religious pluralism. Muhammad's recognition of Jews and Christians as protected peoples (dhimmi), his belief in a common divine text from which all revealed scriptures are derived (the Umm al-Kitab), and his dream of establishing a single, united Ummah encompassing all three faiths of Abraham were startlingly revolutionary ideas in an era in which religion literally created borders between peoples. And despite the ways in which it has been interpreted by militants and fundamentalists who refuse to recognize its historical and cultural context, there are few scriptures in the great religions of the world that can match the reverence with which the Quran speaks of other religious traditions.

It is true that the Quran does not hold the same respect for poly-

theistic religions as it does for monotheistic ones. However, this is primarily a consequence of the fact that the Revelation was revealed during a protracted and bloody war with the "polytheistic" Quraysh. The truth that is the Quranic designation of "protected peoples" was highly flexible and was routinely tailored to match public policy. When Islam expanded into Iran and India, both dualist Zoroastrians and certain polytheistic Hindu sects were designated as dhimmi. And while the Quran does not allow any religion to violate core Muslim values, there is no country in the world that does not restrict the freedom of religion according to public morality. Pluralism implies religious tolerance, not unchecked religious freedom.

The foundation of Islamic pluralism can be summed up in one indisputable verse: "There can be no compulsion in religion" (2:256). This means that the antiquated partitioning of the world into spheres of belief (*dar al-Islam*) and unbelief (*dar al-Harb*), which was first developed during the Crusades but which still maintains its grasp on the imaginations of Traditionalist theologians, is utterly unjustifiable. It also means that the ideology of those Wahhabists who wish to return Islam to some imaginary ideal of original purity must be once and for all abandoned. Islam is and has always been a religion of diversity. The notion that there was once an original, unadulterated Islam that was shattered into heretical sects and schisms is a historical fiction. Both Shi'ism and Sufism in all their wonderful manifestations represent trends of thought that have existed from the very beginning of Islam, and both find their inspiration in the words and deeds of the Prophet. God may be One, but Islam most definitely is not.

Grounding an Islamic democracy in the ideals of pluralism is vital because religious pluralism is the first step toward building an effective human rights policy in the Middle East. Or, as Abdulaziz Sachedina notes, religious pluralism can function as "an active paradigm for a democratic, social pluralism in which people of diverse religious backgrounds are willing to form a community of global citizens." As with Islamic pluralism, the inspiration for an Islamic policy of human rights must be based on the Medinan ideal.

The revolutionary rights Muhammad gave to the marginalized members of his community have been exhaustively detailed in this book, as have the consistent efforts by Muhammad's religious and

political inheritors to overturn those rights. Yet one need simply recall the Prophet's warning to those who questioned his egalitarian measures in Medina—"[They] will be thrown into Hell, where they will dwell forever, suffering from the most shameful punishment" (4:14)—to recognize that acknowledging human rights in Islam is not simply a means of protecting civil liberties, it is a fundamental religious duty.

Nevertheless, the Islamic vision of human rights is neither a prescription for moral relativism, nor does it imply freedom from ethical restraint. Islam's quintessentially communal character necessitates that any human rights policy take into consideration the protection of the community over the autonomy of the individual. And while there may be some circumstances in which Islamic morality may force the rights of the community to prevail over the rights of the individual—for instance, with regard to Quranic commandments forbidding drinking or gambling—these and all other ethical issues must constantly be reevaluated so as to conform to the will of the community.

It must be understood that a respect for human rights, like pluralism, is a process that develops naturally within a democracy. Bear in mind that for approximately two hundred of America's two hundred fifty years of existence, black American citizens were considered legally inferior to whites. Finally, neither human rights nor pluralism is the result of secularization, they are its root cause. Consequently, any democratic society—Islamic or otherwise—dedicated to the principles of pluralism and human rights must dedicate itself to following the unavoidable path toward *political* secularization.

Therein lies the crux of the reformist argument. An Islamic democracy is not intended to be a "theo-democracy," but a democratic system founded upon an Islamic moral framework, devoted to preserving Islamic ideals of pluralism and human rights as they were first introduced in Medina, and open to the inevitable process of political secularization. Islam may eschew secularism, but there is nothing about fundamental Islamic values that opposes the process of political secularization. Only the Prophet had both religious and temporal authority, and the Prophet is no longer among us. Like the Caliphs, kings, and sultans of history's greatest Islamic civilizations, the leaders of an Islamic democracy can hold only civic responsibilities. Moreover, there can be no question as to where sovereignty in such a sys-

tem would rest. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people can be established or demolished solely through the will of the people. After all, it is human beings who create laws, not God. Even laws based on divine scripture require human interpretation in order to be applied in the world. In any case, sovereignty necessitates the ability not just to make laws, but to enforce them. Save for the occasional plague, this is a power God rarely chooses to wield on earth.

Those who argue that a state cannot be considered Islamic unless sovereignty rests in the hands of God are in effect arguing that sovereignty should rest in the hands of the clergy. Because religion is, by definition, interpretation, sovereignty in a religious state would belong to those with the power to interpret religion. Yet for this very reason an Islamic democracy cannot be a religious state. Otherwise it would be an oligarchy, not a democracy.

From the time of the Prophet to the Rightly Guided Caliphs to the great empires and sultanates of the Muslim world, there has never been a successful attempt to establish a monolithic interpretation of the meaning and significance of Islamic beliefs and practices. Indeed, until the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, no Islamic polity in the history of the world had ever been ruled by one individual's reading of scripture. Therefore, any notion of the Valayat-e Faqih, or "guardianship of the Jurist," in an Islamic democracy must remain solely that: guardianship. Not control.

This does not mean the religious authorities would have no influence on the state. Khomeini may have had a point when he asserted that those who spend their lives pursuing religion are the most qualified to interpret it. However, as with the Pope's role in Rome, such influence can be only moral, not political. The function of the clergy in an Islamic democracy is not to rule, but to preserve and, more important, to reflect the morality of the state. Again, because it is not religion, but the interpretation of religion that arbitrates morality, such interpretation must always be in accord with the consensus of the community.

Ultimately, an Islamic democracy must be concerned not with reconciling popular and divine sovereignty, but with reconciling "people's satisfaction with God's approval," to quote Abdolkarim

Soroush. And if ever there is a conflict between the two, it must be the interpretation of Islam that yields to the reality of democracy, not the other way around. It has always been this way. From the very moment that God spoke the first word of Revelation to Muhammad—"Recite!"—the story of Islam has been in a constant state of evolution as it responds to the social, cultural, political, and temporal circumstances of those who are telling it. Now it must evolve once more.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, may have fueled the clash-of-monotheisms mentality among those Muslims, Christians, and Jews who seem so often to mistake religion for faith and scripture for God. But it also initiated a vibrant discourse among Muslims about the meaning and message of Islam in the twenty-first century. What has occurred since that fateful day amounts to nothing short of another Muslim civil war—a *fitnah*—which, like the contest to define Islam after the Prophet's death, is tearing the Muslim community into opposing factions.

It may be too early to know who will write the next chapter of Islam's story, but it is not too early to recognize who will ultimately win the war between reform and counterreform. When fifteen centuries ago Muhammad launched a revolution in Mecca to replace the archaic, rigid, and inequitable strictures of tribal society with a radically new vision of divine morality and social egalitarianism, he tore apart the fabric of traditional Arab society. It took many years of violence and devastation to cleanse the Hijaz of its "false idols." It will take many more to cleanse Islam of its new false idols—bigotry and fanaticism—worshipped by those who have replaced Muhammad's original vision of tolerance and unity with their own ideals of hatred and discord. But the cleansing is inevitable, and the tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here. We are all living in it.

CHAPTER 6

FATWA!

I consider sport a necessity for the health of everyone's mind and body and I agree with it.

—a fatwa from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, endorsing sports

PICK A RANDOM HOTEL LOBBY in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, at almost any hour of day or night and chances are you will find clusters of men ambling through, each of them swathed in two large white bath towels. I was first exposed to this curious spectacle as a novice foreign correspondent in September 1990. I found myself unexpectedly plunked down in the middle of the Red Sea port around midnight, slightly groggy after a harrowing drive down out of the Hejaz mountains. Standing at the reception desk of the Crown Plaza Hotel, I attributed the parade of men in towels through the lobby either to an unusually popular hotel spa or perhaps to the weather—the stifling daytime humidity had not quite

relinquished its grip. A giggling desk clerk set me straight—the men were all pilgrims either headed for Mecca or just returned.

For centuries, Jidda has been the coastal jumping-off point where the faithful trek inland to the holy city of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam. The annual pilgrimage, one of five sacrosanct duties for any Muslim, takes place during a specified month, but the off-season version—called "umrah" in Arabic—is popular year round. Male pilgrims all wear the same religiously prescribed garments—two pieces of unsewn white cloth, usually terry cloth. The piece wrapped around the waist drops to mid-calf or lower, and the second is thrown over one or both shoulders. A shaved head or at least very short hair is also de rigueur for those who have completed the ritual. (Women wear a white garment that shrouds them completely.)

Back in Jidda for the Times, I found myself in yet another hotel lobby, again watching pilgrims ebb and flow across its highly polished white marble floor. This time I was standing with Mohamed el-Dakhakhny, a garrulous Egyptian photographer who often traveled with me around the region. Most pilgrims are older and often flabby, with prominent guts jutting over their towels. So we were both struck by one fit young guy who had cinched a somewhat shorter towel tightly around his skinny waist and accessorized his newly shaved head with dark, wraparound Ray-Bans. He apparently did fine in Mecca, and would not have been out of place in Tahiti, either. I started teasing Mohamed that he might as well abandon the pilgrim business because he would never look as cool even if he shaved his thinning black hair. Mohamed laughed, but he had something else on his mind.

Both he and Abeer Allam, the Egyptian reporter who also traveled with me periodically, wanted to make umrah before we left Jidda for Cairo a few days later.

Both were practicing Muslims who knew the Koran well but wore their faith lightly—they respected the religion without being the least bit dogmatic. Wherever we traveled, though, Mohamed was constantly chatting with people we encountered about matters

of religious practic ions, and the like. I discovered that he was secretly ple e had a dilemma to resolve in this, the homeland of Islam. It gave him an excuse to call a Saudi cleric for a fatwa, a legal opinion drawn from religious law, on the matter. In theory, making any pilgrimage to Mecca wipes the slate clean in terms of accumulated sins. So what worried Mohamed was whether riding in the same car with Abeer, a colleague but certainly not his wife, would somehow negate any religious absolution. He consulted with a few Saudis and then settled on a learned sheikh to petition.

Whenever I mention the word "fatwa" to friends in the West, they usually equate it with a death sentence. This stems from the most famous fatwa of modern times, the one the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran leveled against the author Salman Rushdie in 1989, accusing him of blaspheming Islam in his novel The Satanic Verses, and sentencing him to death. In the ensuing years, the fatwas that attracted the attention of most foreign correspondents also tended to be those with some manner of grim punishment involved. But actually fatwas can be devoted to any topic, large or small, and the devout seek them out constantly like grease that smoothes all manner of daily decisions.

Religious scholars issue fatwas on questions ranging from household quandaries to major issues of public policy. Often expressed in one terse sentence, fatwas answered mundane questions like whether a Muslim woman should ride a bicycle (usually not, too publicly physical) or a man should wear soccer shorts (only if they modestly come below his knees even when he sits down). On the other hand, when the Saudi royal family needed the cover of religion to allow 500,000 infidel American soldiers to deploy in the kingdom after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the princes twisted the arm of the grand mufti to issue a fatwa endorsing the idea. Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz, the chairman of The Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, declared that the need to engage all possible means to defend the nation made that permissible. He cited the Koran and other texts supporting the

idea that a Muslim leader should take all necessary measures before it is too late.

But religious rulings on day-to-day issues like the one my photographer wanted to ask about—whether unmarried colleagues should share a car ride—are far more common. I figured the answer Mohamed sought was a foregone conclusion. We were, after all, in Saudi Arabia, where special religious police impose decisions crucial to law enforcement like ensuring that men and women riding in the same car are either married or otherwise related. Officially known as The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, the religious police both infuriate and intimidate the nonzealous segment of the population. It doesn't take much to get a well-educated Saudi to seethe in frustration at the waste of time and invasion of privacy entailed by any encounter with the muttawa, or "volunteers," as the religious police are called in Arabic.

Take Saud, the executive director of a marketing company, who once found himself pulled over in traffic and forced to answer questions while his spouse was interrogated separately. He did not want me to use his last name lest that attract further unwanted attention.

"I'm an engineer with an MBA driving in my car with my own wife and being questioned about who she is by this idiot who probably didn't graduate from high school," he raged when the subject of the muttawa came up. "Is he God to judge me? They asked what color is our refrigerator? How many kids do we have? What is the color of our bedroom?" When Saud inquired as to why he had been stopped, the muttawa told him it was because he and his wife had been spotted laughing together in the car's front seat. "People shouldn't laugh, particularly with women," he told me. "They are for sex only. That is their attitude."

In Jidda, needless to say, when my photographer called the religious sheikh to ask about sharing a ride to Mecca with Abeer, the horrified cleric told him in the strictest terms that separate cars were an absolute, divinely ordered necessity. Mohamed, rather

pleased with the idea of arranging their trip to Mecca based on an authentic religious fiat, went to Abeer to inform her that they would have to travel apart. Abeer, though steamed, told Mohamed she was fine with respecting the ruling if he insisted, but pointed out that they had already agreed to split the cost of just one car. No good Muslim could renege on a deal, she said, so he would have to pay for the cost of half of her car as well as all of his own. Mohamed was nothing if not thrifty, except for important stuff like golf clubs and sunglasses. Arguing with the wily and willful Abeer got him nowhere. The cost involved sank any lingering desire to respect the sheikh's ruling, so he hit upon a far easier solution.

"Maybe I can find another sheikh!" he exclaimed. He did, and eventually the two shared one car to Mecca and back. (The holy city is off limits to non-Muslims—made abundantly clear with highway signs that basically say "Last Exit for Infidels!"—so all I could do was chuckle about their standoff from a distance.)

Mohamed's technique is sometimes called fatwa shopping, fishing around for a religious scholar who will endorse whatever the supplicant wants. That elasticity on any topic large or small underscores both the benefit and the bane of Islam having no formal ruling structure.

On the one hand, Muslims can rely on their local mosque leader or other respected figure to help interpret complicated, 1,400-year-old religious texts in a way that they can apply to their modern lives. It makes them feel good about their own adherence to their faith. On the downside, men with the most tenuous religious training issue fatwas with impunity. The plethora in recent years has often engendered widespread confusion about which are legitimate and, more notoriously, provided rather flimsy religious justification for all manner of bloody mayhem. Although fatwas issued by official committees or senior clerical political leaders can carry the weight of law, most are nonbinding, allowing states or individuals to pick and choose as they please, which just adds to the muddle. Some prominent religious figures have suggested forming an international panel of scholars to be a kind of centralized fatwa

authority, but the idea has not gained much traction. Instead, fatwa shopping has helped breed fatwa chaos.

The fatwa conundrum underscores one key problem in trying to foment any change or reform in the Middle East. There are so many competing voices, all claiming legitimacy, that it is difficult for anyone to separate fatwas rooted in a genuine desire to interpret the faith from those formulated to achieve political goals. The cacophony hampers singling out any one ruling as authentic.

Who can sort out the contradictions when fatwas on exactly the same question, like whether women should run in elections, can promote opinions that are polar opposites? Critics say far more fatwas are rooted in ideology, in the desire to push a particular policy, than in weighty religious wisdom. The fact that some governments keep senior clerics on the payroll obviously casts doubt on the amount of independent thought behind their rulings. But anyone attacking fatwas risks being accused of blasphemy.

I accept the argument by secular intellectuals that the fatwa explosion is another symptom of the fact that people in the Middle East feel so hopeless and powerless that they focus on the afterlife. If they had more say over their current lives, the influence of religion would diminish. As it stands now, people aren't convinced that any shift in government will bring tangible benefits, which feeds apathy about pushing for change. On the other hand, many believe worship, and by extension following fatwas, will be rewarded with paradise.

One sign that civil society and the rule of law are gaining ground, that people feel as though they have the means to effect change, will be a reduced profile for religious rulings on every single aspect of life. To get to that point, people need to be treated more like citizens and less like subjects. Once people feel that their own voices matter, that they can influence what happens to them on earth, there will be less inclination to make everything conform to Islam so they can go to heaven. Or as my friend Ateyyat el-Abnoudy, an accomplished Egyptian filmmaker, would often tell me, "We say you have to make paradise on earth, not wait until death for pleasure."

Periodically when I was interviewing Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's longtime foreign minister, he would find himself quoting some Arab proverb and would stop to groan, "You know we have a saying for everything." I often felt the same way about fatwas. No topic seemed too obscure, and when trying to assess the viewpoints of competing camps I found it difficult to determine just how much weight to give to the fatwa artillery they inevitably deployed.

Just to add to the confusion, all kinds of religious rulings were labeled fatwas when they were not. Technically, something should only be called a fatwa when it breaks new ground. If a supplicant asked a religious scholar if he could divorce his wife via email, for example, something that had never been done before, the ruling could be considered a fatwa because it spoke to a novel issue. But if it was a question that had been asked hundreds of times before—If you don't bathe after sex can you pray?—then the answer is just a ruling and not a fatwa. The two sides on any controversial issue would inevitably wrangle over whether it was actually a fatwa that ignited the scandal of the moment or just some ordinary opinion. Often it proved impossible to untangle. But the larger point is that people constantly sought a religious seal of approval for whatever they did.

Most fatwas or religious rulings I encountered fell into two broad categories. The first were social—the literally thousands of guidelines issued daily, designed to help people navigate life. These cover myriad matters of hygiene and sex and dress and you name it. Social rulings go largely unnoticed, frankly, although now and again one is so outrageous that the ensuing public outcry forces the religious authority to withdraw it. More often than not the embattled cleric in question will not actually rescind the fatwa, instead claiming that either his words had been "misinterpreted" or that he had merely been expressing an opinion that was mistakenly taken as a fatwa. In Egypt in May 2007, for example, a working woman asked her imam, or cleric, whether she had to veil her hair around the one male colleague whom she had worked with every day for years and years. The cleric ruled that if she suckled her colleague on

her breast five times, a traditional Islamic prescription for becoming a sanctioned surrogate mother, then he could be considered family and she could remove her headscarf at work. Naturally the idea of a grown, hirsute man slurping a female colleague's bared breast so that she could discard her more modest dress, while certainly breaking new ground, defied logic and the fatwa was shouted down.

The second category can be lumped together as political fatwas, when the faithful call on religious authorities to help them decide on issues of the day, or even how to deal with a new phenomenon like elections. Average citizens often turned to religious figures for their perspective on whether the whole process of political change, and with it the democratic political tradition taken for granted in the West, was acceptable under Islam. The welter of rulings on that subject brought far more confusion than clarity.

I should point out that sheer numbers make it difficult to generalize about fatwas. Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti and therefore Egypt's highest religious official, told me at the end of 2008 that Dar Al-Iftaa, or the House of Fatwa, the official fatwa-issuing authority under the Ministry of Justice, answered more than 3,000 queries on religious issues per day. Some twenty religious sheikhs employed full time churned them out in eight languages. The number had tripled over the previous year, which he attributed partly to religious fervor and partly to the ease of asking for them via email and the Internet. Not so many years ago it was just twenty-five fatwas per day, a number the grand mufti himself could handle. Seemingly ignoring his own pronouncements that gave the government periodic cover, he also decried the fact that the blizzard of fatwas was undermining them both as a tool to combat extremism and as a means to ensure that Islamic laws were flexible and balanced.

Those 3,000 fatwas do not include rulings from other key institutions like Al-Azhar University, the historic seat of Sunni Islamic scholarship, which maintains its own fatwa department, as does Cairo University's Center for Islamic Research and Studies. Other

options have just multiplied in the digital age. Any self-respecting cleric or religious institution with a website usually has a page devoted to issuing fatwas and an archive cataloguing all previous wisdom. Media companies that offer a mixture of services to telephone customers such as a daily joke, sports scores, and horoscopes sometimes include a dial-a-sheikh service for rulings over the phone.

Fatwa programs on TV are becoming more and more popular, with sheikhs answering questions sent by email or called in live. But Sheikh Gomaa thought the fact that Egypt's House of Fatwa was attracting so many queries was a sign of success, an indication that people wanted authentic rulings rather than any old quackery from the Internet or satellite television. "It's like hospital orderlies wanting to perform open heart surgery—is that possible?!" he told me. I am not so sure. Those satellite stations seemed awfully popular, and Sheikh Gomaa admitted that opinion about them see-sawed back and forth.

To give you a flavor, one email question answered on a Saudi satellite channel was whether the faithful should clean themselves with paper or water after using the toilet. The sheikh responded, "It is forbidden to use toilet paper if water is available," then went on to suggest that some combination of the two was likely the best option. Part of the question focused on whether what you did in the bathroom was being monitored by a higher being, and the sheikh assured the viewers that toilet protocol might indeed affect your chances of entering paradise. The problem was that if you were not thoroughly clean for prayer, then your supplications wouldn't count and hellfire loomed.

The issues were taken so seriously that I often ended up collapsed with laughter, but it signaled just how central a role religion played in many people's lives. Fatwas were probably more popular among Egyptians and Saudis than elsewhere, given how devout people are in those two countries, but if you expand all the institutions as well as the services issuing religious rulings across more than two dozen countries in the Middle East, you begin to get the

By the time I was skiing there again in 2002, things had loosened up considerably under the government of President Mohamed Khatami. Men and women were even snuggling together—an unheard-of public infraction previously—in the restaurants on the upper slopes. But just in case anyone headed onto the lifts harbored any doubt about whether skiing corresponded with Islamic family values, the sports authority had erected a giant billboard painted with a picture of both the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and a racer shredding downhill. The lettering, in both Persian and slightly butchered English, spelled out the ayatollah's fatwa on the issue: "I consider sport a necessity for the health of everyone's mind and body and I agr [sic] with it."

Nearby, a female guard stationed right before the main gondola reminded all the women heading onto the slopes not to show any hair, a warning they ignored the second they were on the mountain. The juxtaposition between the supreme leader's fatwa and the actual behavior underscored to me the gap between the mullahs and the way people actually lived. Still, even something as mundane as skiing took place under the umbrella of a religious endorsement.

Perhaps my all-time favorite wrestling match between mullahs issuing repeated fatwas and Iranians openly flouting them concerned dogs. The 1979 revolution was supposed to bring forth the first pure Islamic state, so every few years the more zealous clerics would decide that pet dogs had to go. First, religious texts condemn them as unclean, plus the love Westerners shower on pets made them inherently suspect. Iran was hardly alone in this matter—the religious police in Saudi Arabia were also canine averse. In fact, dogs are not particularly popular anywhere in the Arab world because the culture of holding them in low regard affects everyone, including Christians and others. But Iranians in general are much more defiant than Arabs on such social matters.

I had learned that no self-respecting Iranian ayatollah reaches his exalted rank without producing a tome roughly the size of the Manhattan telephone directory describing in minute detail the prescriptions for leading a good Islamic life. I had also been told that some of the information on matters of hygiene comes across as entirely practical, like if while bathing you use your thumb to wash out your anus, how far you can slide it in before you move from ablution (Virtue!) to masturbation (Vice!).

Publishers in the holy city of Qom have helpfully translated the works of the grandest ayatollahs into English, so I went to a large bookstore there to research dog fatwas. The references were remarkably uniform—to the extent that they read like one had cribbed from the next—in placing dogs high on the list of unclean things that any good Muslim shuns. In addition, the Islamic Propaganda Office in Qom published an abridged compilation of fatwas called "Everything You Need to Know." Its list of things that all Muslims should avidly avoid was topped by beer, wine, infidels, and dogs.

Emerging from the bookstore, I spotted a glass storefront labeled "The Information Bank," which the Times's endlessly resourceful Iranian reporter, Nazila Fathi, informed me was a computerized reference library for religious queries. Thrilled, I went straight in to ask "What does Islam say about dogs?" The obliging staff plugged the word "dog" into their computers and all the official citations came whirring out. The Koran contains just one vague reference to a tribe that owned dogs. But the Hadith, the often disputed sayings of the prophet and his contemporaries that form the basis for much Islamic law, mentioned dogs no fewer than 430 times.

A few references noted positive characteristics such as their loyalty and herding abilities. So guard dogs and sheep dogs are condoned. But most Hadiths denigrated dogs as "najis," Arabic for unclean. "Angels do not enter a house that has either a dog or a picture in it," read one. Another said, "Whoever keeps a dog except for hunting, guarding cattle, and crops will lose one large measure

of his reward every day," i.e., a pet dog is a serious impediment to entering paradise.

The religious texts warned about the perils of owning even acceptable dogs. If a guard dog licks one of your dinner plates, for example, serious scrubbing is involved to restore its cleanliness. "When the dog licks the utensil, wash it seven times, and rub it with earth the eighth time," advised one Hadith. Dog owners get around this one by claiming the Hadith is surely being taken out of context, the seventh-century dog in question probably had rabies or something. Also the arguments go on endlessly whether the Prophet Mohamed was issuing an all-encompassing edict, or just expressing an opinion befitting a very limited, one-time situation.

My initial interest in the whole doggie debate was sparked by a midranking provincial cleric whose Friday sermon fulminating against four-legged should-not-be-friends was featured on the national news. "I would like to thank the honorable police and judges and all those who worked to arrest dog lovers and to confiscate short-legged dogs in this city!" he thundered, going on to suggest that the martyrs for Islam who died in the Iran-Iraq War, which had ended a good thirteen years earlier, should consider themselves doubly blessed because they died before enduring such insults to Islamic values. "Happy are those who became martyrs and did not witness the playing with dogs!" the mullah ranted. "Now in our society women wear hats and men hold dogs!" (Some of the more daring Iranian women had tried to replace their mandatory headscarves with hats.)

Dog owners told me that a wave of fatwas condemning dogs spilled out about every two years. With the number of dogs available sharply limited since dog sellers were treated as lowly criminals, a black market thrived. I met one well-to-do woman in north Tehran who had let her tall black poodle wander a little too far, only to watch in horror as two men on a motorbike swooped past and grabbed the pooch. The woman found her pet for sale a week later in Molavi, a commercial district near the downtown bazaar and home to the main animal market—selling mostly birds but

also exotic creatures like snakes, squirrels, and monkeys. Thieves trafficking in kidnapped dogs worked out of their car trunks. They deployed much like Western drug dealers, sidling up to pedestrians to whisper, "Dog, got a dog." One who approached me was more specific. "Got a German shepherd," he whispered in English right in my ear.

When I asked pet-shop owners about dogs, I always got a quick reaction. "We have all kinds of dogs, except the kind that wear turbans," laughed one. On the sidewalk I bumped into a municipal worker cruising the market looking for dogs to confiscate. He explained to me that the owner had to produce a license and a record of shots to stay any execution. He was immediately denounced by a man waving a dog license and demanding his animal back. When the city worker demurred, the man started screaming and grabbed the municipal worker around the throat, choking him and prompting police intervention.

One bystander suddenly turned to me and said quietly, "There are no laws in the way they take away dogs, just like people."

Not all fatwa fights provided such a vivid illustration of the way a country actually works. More often I was left scratching my head trying to figure out their importance. Sometimes fatwas came across as so strikingly obvious that I wanted to explore what was the point exactly, to understand why these abbreviated pronouncements were so cherished.

For answers, I went to Al-Azhar University, one of the world's oldest centers of Muslim scholarship set in the heart of Cairo's teeming medieval quarter, to speak with Sheikh Khalid el-Guindi, a young religious scholar trying to modernize the whole fatwa process.

Fatwas serve as the link between the various schools of Islam and contemporary reality, he told me, and are rooted in explaining Shariah, or Islamic law, in a way that teaches people good morals: "A fatwa is the means by which a sheikh works on repairing life through religion and closing the gap between what the religion demands and what actually occurs."

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Islam can be broken down into two parts, he said, made up of the beliefs themselves and then deeds, or the way it is lived. Some deeds are clear-cut, like how to pray, but the bulk of life is more ambiguous. Fatwas try to minimize that ambiguity in such a way that society benefits. Sheikh Guindi attempted to put the best possible spin on the fact that fatwas were all over the map, calling the differences of opinion part of the religion's "democratic spirit" that had existed since it was founded. The Koran says that decisions have to be made via consultation, Sheikh Guindi told me, but given the fact that the sacred texts are all open to interpretation, there is no absolute right opinion. True religious scholars had to approach fatwas with the spirit that "my opinion is right, but there is the possibility that it is mistaken, and the other opinion is wrong but there is the possibility that it might be right." Naturally this spirit fuels fatwa shopping and more than a little anarchy.

Sheikh Guindi was the main religious scholar behind a wildly popular dial-a-sheikh service called The Islamic Line, and he let me spend a few hours listening in to the hundreds of calls he got each day. Older scholars, arguing that fatwas should be free, had criticized him because people had to pay for the service on their phone bills. Sheikh Guindi brushed them aside as dinosaurs. "Why are religious issues so often discussed with a frown, with tension, with stiffness and violence?" the sheikh said to me in his living room, where he had exchanged his clerical garb for a polo shirt. "We reject this. As a matter of fact we—a group of religious scholars—understand that we have to work with the new technology and to use it to serve religion."

The Islamic Line was designed to help negotiate the dense thicket of religious tradition in minimal time. Ninety percent of the callers were women and 30 percent of all calls were about sex, which Sheikh Guindi believed indicated that many felt more comfortable asking deeply personal questions over the telephone than in person. "Islam does not welcome any interference between man and God," Sheikh Guindi told me. "But the scholars are the ones

who specialize in religious manuscripts and can transmit it to people in a way they can understand."

The irrepressible sheikh giggled at some of the calls—like one man asking how to use a condom or another demanding why, exactly, smoking hashish is forbidden or the woman wanting to know what the reward for her gender was in heaven given that men were promised a bevy of beautiful virgins. (The answer: one man, but such a good one that she would want no other.)

The sheikh could be stern when callers sounded wobbly in their practices. One woman said she owned three hotels in major tourist sites around Egypt, pulling in over $1 million in annual profit from alcohol sales alone. She wanted to confirm that giving all that money to charity would absolve her of any sin associated with selling something that Islam forbids. The sheikh warned her that the money was tainted and the only way to avoid punishment in the hereafter was to get out of the business. When a caller asked what it meant to be secular, Sheikh Guindi gave a somewhat long explanation about those who separate religion from improving the society. He said dividing the two is impossible because God created the faith in order to regulate all aspects of life.

The sheikh attributed the high volume of calls about sex to the fact that unemployed young people had plenty of free time on their hands and were more inclined to experiment. One man called asking if masturbation is a sin; the sheikh counseled prayer and lots of sports before marriage. Another man said he had a gay friend and wanted to know how Islam judged homosexuals. Sheikh Guindi said it was such a big sin that it shook the heavens and that the man's friend should repent—consulting a doctor if he is sick and getting married if he is single. The sheikh advised the caller to drop his friendship with the man lest he fall under the homosexual spell.

One woman said she was having an affair with a man who offered her a form of do-it-yourself Islamic marriage to lend their liaison legitimacy. The sheikh, who usually kept his fatwas short and snappy because the callers paid by the minute, went on at length

telling her to ditch the guy before he drags her "to the bottom of a well filled with depravity." Any man worth trusting would want an officially registered marriage.

"I'm warning you seriously that this young man is fooling with you and playing with you and that he will dump you in the first garbage can when he loses interest in you and he will run away as if he did nothing," the sheikh said. "He wants to keep this sexual relationship with you while giving it the cover of a legal relationship."

To absolve herself of sin, he said, she had to regret what she had done, never repeat it, and pay money to the poor as charity if she could afford it because good deeds outweigh bad deeds and keep the whole thing secret. Sheikh Guindi told me that he wanted to emphasize the gentle side of Islam, which at least superficially appeared to be the case when, for example, two of the four-minute pre-taped sermons available over the phone on particular topics included "Why should you wear the veil?" and "Why shouldn't you wear the veil?"

The first basically told women to cover as much as possible in the most somber colors, and to avoid flashy clothes or anything called "fashion." Callers who opted for the second question were quickly admonished that they are mistaken if they thought they could be modest without veiling. "The veil is obligatory to all believing women so if you do not abide by your religion you will be punished for disobeying God's orders," the sermon said, adding that an unveiled woman will be penalized on judgment day for every man who ever looked at her.

The sheikh's answers were conservative and, to me, emphasized just how the religious establishment held sway over so many people. Pushing the idea that believers had to conform to the sheikh's every prescription in order to lead a virtuous life and thereby earn a spot in heaven kept laymen living in fear and dread of heading down the wrong path. Endless such rulings by Egypt's sheikhs ensured that the country stayed a socially conservative place, or at least forced people who wanted to flout tradition to do so surreptitiously. Ultimately, fatwas on social subjects helped put the brake on

change in the Arab world. The religious scholars were not believers in opening up the windows to allow in fresh air, the old air was just fine. The government apparently agreed, giving Sheikh Guindi a prominent role on one of the most popular nightly talk shows, where his appearance helped burnish the regime's conservative religious credentials.

There were times, however, when those pushing social change managed to score a fatwa that furthered their aims. Once I stumbled across a remarkable fatwa from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader in predominately Shiite Iran. It was a single letter stamped with official seals that had been pressed under a doctor's glass desktop in the vasectomy department of a birth control clinic. By the late 1990s, when the clinic opened to serve one of the poorer quarters of south Tehran, the Iranian regime had realized that it could ill afford the staggering population explosion it had initially encouraged to produce a new generation of Islamic revolutionaries. The population had roughly doubled to around 60 million since the 1979 overthrow of the shah.

Every single one of the leery men shuffling into the vasectomy department first sought reassurance that the operation would not cause their voices to rise or their beards to fall out. Then the questions invariably turned to whether Islam condoned the procedure. The doctor would just tap on the glass. The clinic's founder, Freidoun Forouhari, had wisely solicited a fatwa from Iran's supreme leader asking whether men could practice birth control. In his brief ruling, Ayatollah Khamenei listed the withdrawal method, condoms, and vasectomies as acceptable male contraception. He scrawled two lines at the end that translated roughly as "When wisdom dictates that you do not need more children, a vasectomy is permissible."

That fatwa ensured that the clinic was always mobbed. It did not guarantee full protection, however. Forouhari was one of the men stabbed to death during a campaign by rogue elements within the

government to eliminate reformists. The pattern of his murder made it seem as though he was among those targeted, his grim fate underscoring how easy it was for ideologues bent on blocking change to ignore any fatwa that contradicted their own version of Islam.

Saudi Arabia served as the font of all manner of hostile fatwas, the bulk of them scolding about the evils of Western life gaining a foothold in the birthplace of Islam. Innovation, or "bidaa'" in Arabic, is a dirty word in the kingdom. Walking around upscale shopping malls in Jidda or Riyadh, I would see bearded men in short robes, the mark of a puritan because it supposedly mirrored the Prophet Mohamed's look, handing out tracts brimming with freshly minted fatwas. The pamphlets were brief, easy to read, and written in bold letters with colorful Arabic fonts.

One such pamphlet declared that having music as your cell phone ring tone was forbidden, another denounced the Western practice of bringing flowers to hospital patients. No Muslim ever did so in ancient times so it was clearly aping the infidel rather than benefiting the patient and therefore taboo. Ceremonies modeled on Western practices, like passing out awards to forty-seven exceptional teachers on something called International Teachers Day, were decried as shameful.

The variations seemed endless. I read a tract that fulminated against credit cards, saying it was a sin to use them because it meant paying interest, which Islam bars. The whole idea of how the faithful should avoid any kind of non-Muslim holiday celebration was a favorite theme. "Congratulating them on their holidays amounts to accepting non-Muslim occasions and the all-mighty Allah will not be pleased with such deeds," warned a pamphlet distributed by an organization called The Office to Propagate Spiritual Guidance in Jidda. "If non-Muslims greet you on the occasion of Christmas or the New Year, you should not reply to them," it went on, warning

darkly that Muslims should also avoid attending holiday parties or even eating any kind of treat: "What you think might be courtesy in these matters is actually acquiescence in religion." In other words, scarfing a gingerbread man in December would set you on the path to hell because it is tantamount to accepting a Christian God.

Emerging from noon prayers one Friday, a friend found under his windshield wipers a forty-seven-page screed condemning the evils of the tourism industry that Saudi Arabia was trying to develop. Among its most dire warnings was that all Saudis would be forced to swim on nudist beaches—foreigners working in the kingdom had already turned charming offshore islands into "hotbeds of naked women"—and that wherever tourists gather there is sure to be alcohol and endless wanton spectacles like ballet and belly dancing. "The mere entry of these infidels into the country is itself a great vice for which we will be punished, not to mention their nakedness, their uncovered women and their depravity," the tract thundered, arguing that anyone who worked in the industry was bound to become a prostitute or a pimp. "In Egypt all tourist guides, women and men, specialize in sexual entertainment. Male guides organize sex between Egyptian women and tourists and Egyptian men with the blonde women of Europe." (In ancient Middle Eastern texts, any blond character would almost invariably do something malevolent.) The modern screed somehow failed to mention the endless stream of Saudi men who pour into Egypt for the very same thing.

The tract noted that the late Sheikh bin Baz, the grand mufti, had expressly forbidden the preservation of historic monuments and predicted that preservationists working to save any pre-Islamic monuments would go to hell while those who tore them down would be assured entrance to Paradise. This was rooted in the Wahhabi teaching that it was a sin to invest religious significance in anything related to men deemed holy (i.e., saint's tombs), that the unity of God could not be subdivided and his word alone was sacred. The pamphlet did not reserve its scorn for non-Muslims alone, reflecting just how seriously Saudi Muslims

believe themselves superior to all their brethren in the faith. "Most foreign laborers create gangs," it said. "Africans specialize in armed robbery; Afghanis and Pakistanis in selling drugs; Indians in alcohol; Filipinos in gay sex; the Levant Arabs in fornication. All other Muslim workers are evil, and we Saudi Muslims are suffering from their plague." (It failed to mention that without the army of millions of foreign laborers, the country would grind to a halt since Saudis generally consider manual labor beneath them.) In the end, the pamphlet warned, Saudi youths will grow tired of rampant vice and end up cutting off people's heads in order to defend their religion.

In case avid fatwa followers did not get their fill from the daily stream of such rulings, or had a favorite religious figure who was dead and no longer issuing new ones, Saudi publishers rolled out many thick books of fatwa greatest hits. To give me the flavor, a religious scholar I was interviewing plucked off his shelf one of sixteen volumes of what he called The Wahhabi Encyclopedia, a sweeping collection of important rulings across decades. He opened it at random to a page containing two fatwas from the 1960s, attacking the idea of opening schools for girls. One said that every Muslim should avoid placing "his daughter or sister in these schools, which appear to be benign but are full of evil and sedition and will end in madness and wantonness and the loss of all morality and virtue."

Another said that any woman who had been educated automatically tore up her veil and displayed her head, bosom, thighs, and legs in public. In Arabic, it said educating girls only resulted in "tabaruj," definitely one of my all-time favorite words because it underscored the richly varied nature of the language. It literally means "to display one's charms," but in a derogatory sense as in "brazen hussy." For example, whenever the religious police caught sight of my colleague Donna Abu-Nasr, the Saudi bureau chief for The Associated Press, approaching strangers on the street to interview, even though she was always dressed in a full abaya and headscarf, they would yell at her to stop, demanding to know why she

was mixing openly with men "without shame." They inevitably tried to insult her by addressing her as "Mutabaraja!" (mu-ta-BAR-raja), the noun form of the word. Or in other words, "Stop displaying your charms!"

Bookshops in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina sold one 1,265-page souvenir tome that was a kind of anthology of fatwas on modern life by some of the most popular recently deceased Islamic scholars. It was riddled with rulings admonishing the faithful to shun non-Muslims, never to smile at them, and avoid at all costs addressing them as "friend." A fatwa from one famous sheikh, Mohamed bin Othaiman, whose 2001 funeral drew hundreds of thousands of mourners, tackled the notion of Muslims living in infidel lands. The whole idea was discouraged, but anyone who found himself in that predicament should "harbor enmity and hatred for the infidels," it read in part. No one should ape Westerners in their manner of dress, another fatwa thundered. The late Sheikh bin Baz had warned his followers repeatedly to avoid even visiting the West on vacation—so forbidding summer travel "to the land of the infidels" became a favorite fatwa theme. Going to Florida, let's say, was religiously suspect because anyone who did was likely to attend a party where alcohol was served, and the idea of Saudi women unveiling in the West combined with Saudi men ogling Western women displaying all their charms was bound to lead to no good. Not that all such fatwas had much effect: Saudi Airlines used to add frequent direct flights from the kingdom to Orlando in the summer because it was such a popular vacation destination. (Saudis who flouted such pronouncements sometimes did so with a distinctive sense of humor, at least in urban legends. A group of expatriate Saudis reportedly opened a nightclub in Bangkok, Thailand called The Bin Baz Bar.)

I had an ongoing discussion with Saudi friends such as Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who had once been sympathetic to the mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, about how much weight to lend such a blizzard of rulings. His viewpoint changed to the degree that he was fired from his job as editor of Al-Watan

newspaper in 2003 after he opened its pages to a raging debate on whether Wahhabi intolerance was a root of extremist violence. (He got it back some four years later.) The cartoon that proved his undoing showed a would-be suicide bomber, but the sticks of dynamite strapped around his waist were all labeled FATWA.

Khashoggi argued that fatwas about ordinary social issues, especially those banning popular practices, only served to alienate ordinary people from the zealots and were obviously far less horrifying than any justifying suicide bombings. But he recognized that attempts at social engineering, condemning anything from the West, could have a dangerous twist once extremist religious scholars went one step further and sanctioned violence against anyone they considered to be polluting Islam.

Sometimes it seemed to me that the avalanche of fatwas trying to hold back the onslaught of Western cultural influences did indicate that Saudi Arabia and other societies were changing in innumerable small ways and that attempts to stem that tide were relatively impotent. Take Valentine's Day. For weeks beforehand the various religious organizations would paper shopping centers and other public places with fatwa pamphlets declaring that anyone who wore red on that day was an agent of the devil. Then the entire morals police would deploy to make sure that no one was selling roses or wearing the color—girls on college campuses with so much as a red hair clip would be sent home.

In her groundbreaking 2005 novel Girls of Riyadh, which caused a sensation among educated Saudis, author Rajaa Alsanea detailed the various ways some college-aged girls thwarted the effort. Guys also got into the act, some handing out red roses with their telephone numbers on the stem. Girls "loved it because someone gave them a red flower just like in the movies," she wrote. "All the means of celebrating love are banned in Saudi Arabia; in our country celebrating love is outlawed."

Now, an attempt by educated, well-to-do college girls to celebrate Valentine's Day did not mean that a social revolution was at hand, but such skirmishing did signify that when socially conservative

values clashed with changes that people wanted, no force of fatwas or other means was likely to stop them. Exposure to other ways of living inevitably eroded the idea that people living in puritanical Muslim societies had to stick with their old traditions. That is what the religious authorities feared, that it would start with red lipstick and dogs, and end with tossing Islam aside.

The reaction to fatwas does have implications for how people in the Middle East obtain greater freedom—whether they take authority seriously, whether they deceive it, and how they might face it down. On this score, in terms of more profound matters of change, perhaps the most interesting flood of fatwas was generated by elections and other attempts at reformatting the region's ossified political systems. Never mind that the outcomes of most of these elections were designed to produce rubber-stamp bodies with little real power.

For example, both opponents and supporters of women participating as candidates in municipal council elections revived in 2002 in the Lilliputian island state of Bahrain sought religious fatwas to buttress their position.

Bahiya al-Ataawi, a kindergarten teacher in her 40s, petitioned a famous cleric who endorsed women running. That fatwa came from Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, perhaps the Arab world's most influential Sunni cleric due to his talk show on Al-Jazeera satellite network focused on applying Islamic law to daily life. His answer spoke volumes about the role of women from a religious point of view. It said as long as they were qualified, and as long as holding elected office did not interfere with being good wives and mothers, they could run. His fatwa went on to recommend that, if men and women did end up on the council together, they avoid looking at each other unless absolutely necessary. "There is a need for Muslim women candidates to enter this campaign to confront the corrupted women," Sheikh Qaradawi wrote, presumably meaning the unveiled and not the many prostitutes working in Bahrain's rather freewheeling nightlife. He also argued that it was OK because men would likely maintain a majority on any council and

the Koranic injunction applied only to a woman running an entire nation.

Ataawi distributed the fatwa with all her campaign literature and it spread across the island, prompting an unidentified Bahraini man to seek an opposing ruling from a Saudi cleric. Using virtually the same sacred texts, that fatwa concluded that "men are supposed to control women and handle their affairs."

Men ordering their wives how to vote was a common problem in the Middle East, and the most creative solution I encountered was dreamt up by Nariman el-Daramali, an Egyptian woman running for parliament from heavily conservative Upper Egypt. Keep in mind that Egyptian women have had the right to run and vote since 1956, but still find male dominance a hurdle. While campaigning, Daramali carried both a Koran and a Bible, since Coptic Christians lived in many villages along the Nile in her district. Whenever a woman promised to vote for her, she would whip out the appropriate holy text and ask the voter to swear on it. Then when their husbands tried to pressure them to vote for a different candidate, they could say they had made a holy oath and refuse. Daramali won with a record turnout.

The most restrictive rules in the region, completely barring any participation by women, were promulgated by Saudi Arabia for its first nationwide municipal elections in 2005. But one religious scholar took the effort to influence the outcome a step further by issuing a fatwa about which candidates to support. The scholar, a professor of Islamic law at Imam Bin Saudi Islamic University in Riyadh, one of the country's foremost religious institutions, was asked his opinion about voting for candidates whose platforms included allowing women to drive, opening sports clubs for them, and building movie theaters—proscribed as public spaces where the sexes might mingle.

The fatwa read: "It is forbidden to vote for them, indeed it is forbidden to vote for any candidate who calls for anything that contradicts Shariah," or Islamic law. The widely publicized ruling sparked outrage among candidates not affiliated with certain religious

organizations as unfair manipulation. Ultimately, religious candidates captured virtually every seat across the country.

It could be argued that the Saudi municipal elections represented a small progressive evolution because the religious establishment did not issue its habitual denunciations against elections as a heretical, imported innovation. Some scholars went so far as to dredge up examples from the life of the Prophet Mohamed that supported democracy. I've never seen Saudi men collectively as excited as they were by the municipal elections in 2005, packing campaign tents long into the night, but then again there is not a lot to do in Riyadh or other cities. Still, I suspect religious figures gauged the excitement and then their fatwas went with the general tide. My sense was that satellite television channels, exposure to the Internet, and a wider sense of the world were beginning to have their effect when it came to nascent elections. One Saudi friend told me his elderly mother was watching a story on Al-Jazeera about election returns in Peru when she suddenly piped up, wondering why there were no real elections in the Arab world. It was dawning among the general Arab public that their region was unique in its lack of such freedoms, that they were out of sync with the times, so the religious establishment figured trying to stop the trend was futile and its best shot was influencing the outcome, which it did.

Of course that influence grated on the nerves of the secular types who had been opposing various despotic rulers for years and sought to establish multiparty democratic systems. I remember one of the founders of Kuwait's most liberal political movement blurting out, "How can you be a democrat and follow a fatwa?"

The men and women pushing for change whom I sympathized with the most were those pushing for the broadest array of freedoms, including the ability to establish political parties and a flourishing civil society. They wanted to be allowed to criticize any government policy and to suggest alternatives without facing arrest. I'm certain that such freedom would have lanced much of the anger and frustration caused by the stunted horizons many

people faced, anger that ultimately led some to religious extremism and violence.

The fact that fatwas were used to slow change more often than to promote it left me pessimistic at first. It was easy to bemoan the fact that the public, rather than rushing out to embrace change, was turning to religious scholars to consult medieval texts as to whether or not participating in elections was a good idea. But the mere fact that they were asking such questions, casting about for answers in the only manner they knew how, did underscore that people were interested in change; they wanted something different in their lives. If it took a fatwa to get them to explore further, well then I finally decided that a fatwa could be a stepping-stone toward still strange and uncertain progress.

mosques, killed clerics, and abducted and murdered civilians. Despite calls for calm the violence continued to rage, exposing the deep sectarian fissures that were shaping Shia identity and politics.

As American tanks rolled across the plains of Iraq, the majority that Gertrude Bell had wished away began to act its part. No sooner had statues of Saddam tumbled across Baghdad than the scope of change became apparent. Pictures of imams and ayatollahs were ubiquitous on walls from Basra to Baghdad, and the bazaars and alleyways of Karbala and Najaf came alive with pilgrims who came from near and far to visit the Shia shrines. Change was also evident in the composition of the Iraqi Interim Governing Council (IGC), the transitional governing body that the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority had set up as a first step toward handing over power to Iraqis. Thirteen of the IGC's twenty-five members were Shias, as was its first head, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. As Iraq's Shia vice president, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, put it, "The Shia could now raise their head; they could represent Iraq."[9]

While many hailed the Shias' prominence on the IGC and saw it as a mark of greater pluralism, Sunnis took it as an ominous sign. Sunni leaders in suits and clerical robes alike objected vigorously. After the United States began "de-Ba'thification" of government agencies and summarily disbanded what was left of the Saddam-era Iraqi military, Sunni concern turned to alienation and anger. Many saw "de-Ba'thification" as another name for "de-Sunnification." The championing of the policy by once-exiled Shia politicians such as Ahmad Chalabi and Abdul-Aziz Hakim only heightened this angst.

Sunnis associated growing Shia power with Iran. Sunni leaders, especially those with Ba'thist ties, even accused the Shia point-blank of being tools in a nefarious Iranian campaign to subjugate and con-

trol Iraq. Hazem Shaalan, who served as defense minister in the interim government of the secular Shia prime minister Iyad Allawi, called Iran Iraq's enemy number one and claimed that Tehran was responsible for most of the violence in the country. Shaalan hoped to prevent emerging ties between Iraq's Shias and Iran from determining the course of Iraqi politics. This became clearer when he characterized the election list of the Shia-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) as the "cat's paw of Iran."[10] Shaalan's views were a reflection of the way that many Iraqi Sunnis and some secular Shias saw the UIA and the government that it would form after winning the January 2005 elections. It was not only openly Shia but was led by men who had maintained close ties with Iran since the 1980s. Many Sunnis spoke of it with bitter derision as "the Safavid government."

When, during the ensuing constitutional debates, elements of the UIA called for federalism and a Shia autonomous zone in the south, Sunnis were quick to dismiss the idea as an Iranian plot to dismember Iraq.[11] All this underlined the strikingly different notions of identity, and also perceptions of the Iran-Iraq war, that were at play among the Sunni and the Shia. Whereas Sunnis emphasized the Arab-Iranian and Iraqi-Iranian divide and still saw Iran through the blood-coated lenses of the 1980s, Shias felt an attachment to the religious identity that they shared with Iranians, who were their only source of support in the aftermath of their ill-fated 1991 uprising. They saw the war as Saddam's sin, in which Shias from both sides of the border were caught up as combatant-victims.[12] In the minds of Iranians and many Iraqi Shias, the Iran-Iraq war became the Iran-Saddam war. Shia soldiers on both sides fought for faith and country, but they were wrapped into a Sunni dictator's war of ambition and fear. With Saddam gone, the memory of the war unites rather than divides Shias in the two countries.

That Shias would vote for leaders such as Ibrahim Jaafari and Abdul-Aziz Hakim, who had spent the war years living in Tehran

and whom many Sunnis saw as traitors, showed the widening gulf between the two communities. This became more evident after Prime Minister Jaafari opened diplomatic ties with Iran and expressed regret for Iraq's conduct during the war.

Outside the precincts of government, Muqtada's popularity grew in the months following the U.S.-led invasion, but not because of his anti-Iranian posturing. In fact, his superficial nationalist rhetoric belied his actual interest in drawing Iranian money and support.[13] Iranian birth and citizenship did not diminish Ayatollah Sistani's broad support among Iraq's Shias, and despite close ties with Iran, SCIRI was able to deepen its support in Baghdad and the south. At the same time, Iyad Allawi, who campaigned in the January elections as a bridge-builder, reaching out to Sunnis, did poorly; by some estimates his support was even weaker than his numbers suggested.[14] Almost a year later in the December 2005 elections his popularity would plummet even further. All this showed that amid the raucous accusations of Iranian influence-peddling in Iraq, for the country's Shias the enemy was not external—not Iran—but rather internal. The problems, as Shias saw them, were Ba'thism and Salafi-style extremism, which could easily foster tactical alliances and which were casting a grim double shadow over Sunni politics.

Iraqi Sunnis' attitudes were from the outset shaped by their belief that they would be able to get back on top. Many Sunnis clung to the illusion that the Shias' majority status within the country was a myth spread by America. One Sunni talking point, repeated by no less a figure than Jordan's King Abdullah as well as then Defense Minister Shaalan, was that Iranians were crossing the border into Iraq in order to inflate Shia numbers.[15] The insinuation was that many, if not most, Shias were not actually Iraqi at all—that Iraq was being turned into a Shia state by force and fraud.

The currency of such beliefs among Sunni Arabs was important in driving the Sunni decision to boycott the January 2005 elections—a choice that the weight of Sunni opinion later came to recognize as a mistake. Many Sunnis at the time, however, were still overestimating their own share of Iraq's population and so believed that sitting out the January vote would hold turnout below the final mark of almost 60 percent. The same belief was also at play when Sunni members of the committee charged with drafting a new constitution first rejected the final draft in the summer of 2005 and then agreed to putting it to a vote—only after securing guarantees that key clauses could be renegotiated later. They expected to be able to sink this draft in the referendum that would have to sanction the constitution. The Sunnis would then, they hoped, have a noticeably greater say in the new parliament that would have to be elected to restart the process. Despite large Sunni turnout, the referendum approved the constitution. The results showed the universal Sunni disdain for the constitution but failed to derail it, disappointing Sunnis by confirming that there are fewer Sunnis in Iraq than they had estimated. This point became irrefutably clear in the December 2005 national elections. The Sunni turnout was high but Sunni parties still lagged behind the Shia coalition in the final tally of the vote by a margin of more than two to one. Parties that had led Sunnis into the political process now stood accused of having only confirmed their minority status. Having exposed Sunni weakness, all the Sunni parties could do was challenge the election results.

Sunnis also believed, perhaps with some justification, that Shias would not be able to rule Iraq without their cooperation. Otherwise a Shia government would work only if propped up by Iran and the United States. Accusing Shias of ties with Iran was designed to isolate them politically and sully their relations with the United States, and also to underscore the fact that they could not rule without for-

eign support. This strategy required attacking the country's infrastructure, along with international agencies and humanitarian groups, to weaken the government and prevent it from providing basic services to the population. Attacking the Shia government and its security forces directly would further emphasize its inability to provide security.

Iraqi Shias had joined the new security forces in droves. They were encouraged to do so by their leaders; even Ayatollah Sistani openly encouraged Shia youth to join, which they continued to do in the face of the raging violence. The Shia saw the new state as their state. There was no reason for them to resist state-building; to the contrary, they had everything to gain. Thus the Sunni attacks—killing recruits standing in queues to join the police and security forces, bombing police stations, and kidnapping and killing police and security forces—were not just (or even primarily) acts of resistance against American occupation but efforts to impede the emergence of a Shia-dominated nation.

Sunnis viewed Iraqi security forces as Shia—and at times Kurdish—militias and interpreted their security operations in Sunni towns as sectarian provocations. For Sunnis, the Badr Brigade, many of whose cadres had joined the Interior Ministry and the security forces and were accused of abusing Sunni prisoners in government-run detention centers, looked much like Lebanese Shia militias such as Amal and Hezbollah, and prospects of its assumption of power evoked images of the bloody civil war that tore at Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. The Badr troops appeared to be the most anti-Sunni element in Iraq's Shia politics, and Sunnis held it responsible for attacks on their mosques and clerics. In July 2005, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed the Umar Brigade to confront the Badr forces directly.[16] The choice of name—of the second caliph, hero to Sunnis and villain to Shias—was to inflame sectarian passions on

both sides. The new brigade targeted Shias, and especially the members of the Amiri tribe (many of whom live in Sadr City), to which the Badr Brigade's commander Hadi al-Amiri belongs.

Suicide bombings throughout 2005 continued to be aimed at Shias for the most part, killing policemen, construction workers, clerics, community leaders, government officials, pilgrims, and men, women, and children at work, at play, at prayer, and in markets, hospitals, and offices, and on streets everywhere. These actions were designed to intimidate the Shia and sap their confidence. In addition, hundreds more ordinary Shias were murdered in what has appeared to be random violence. Some were shot at home or in the street. Others were abducted and found floating in the Tigris, their hands bound and throats cut. Throughout 2005, each dawn revealed bodies dumped by the roadsides or on garbage heaps. Some were killed alone or in small groups. Others were killed in large numbers. The deaths were a testament to the Sunni resistance against the Shia revival and the deepening of the sectarian divide.[17] The violence drew on the Sunnis' long-held belief that when intimidated, the Shia always back down. That was how the Abbasids dealt with Shia unrest, how Saddam ruled over his Shia majority, and how Pakistan's Sunni extremists ended the challenge from their Shia minority. Sunni responses to the Shia challenge have always been displays of force and power. The insurgency strove to show the Shia—and the United States—that the Sunnis could keep the violence going forever, in the belief that this would eventually force the United States to abandon the Shia, thereby paving the way for the return of some form of Sunni rule.

The attacks were also meant to show the Shia that their chosen government and their venerated religious leaders were feeble and incapable of protecting them. Nor was the United States able to provide the security the Shia yearned for. Shias were not safe in their

markets, homes, mosques, police stations, or, symbolically, at the large religious gatherings that were banned under Saddam and were now commemorated by millions as a mark of Shia empowerment.

For many Iraqis, what was unfolding in the country in the summer of 2005 was no longer just an insurgency but a civil war. As suicide bombers killed and maimed, attacked shrines and mosques, provoking retaliations and chaos on the streets, the country began slowly to come apart. In the midst of the violence, the fuss over democracy, development, and writing constitutions did not answer the fundamental question: How would the new Iraq give the Shia majority not only de jure political control but also de facto protection from violence? Without Sunni acquiescence to the new reality, it would not be easy to achieve both goals.

It was in this context that many Shias in the south, secular as well as those associated with SCIRI, abandoned commitment to a strong central government and demanded autonomy for Shia regions in the south under a federal constitution. The violence perpetrated against them made the notion of an Iraqi nation a distant dream, with no reflection in the hatred and violence that faced them. If the United States and Iraqi forces could neither crush nor mollify the insurgency, and if Sunnis were unwilling to accept Shia rule over Iraq, then perhaps Shias would need to think about Iraq differently.

The Sunnis found federalism threatening, not only because the Shia—and the Kurds—would have sole control over oil revenue, but because it challenged their conception of a unitary Iraq. If there was to be no strong center in Iraq, then there would be no basis to the Sunni claim that without them it would not be possible to govern the country.

By the summer of 2005, the insurgency consisted of as many as forty groups, but its most important and potent elements were former Ba'thists as well as extreme Salafis and other jihadis.[18] These

two defined the force and ideology of the insurgency, and the thrust of their campaigns, which became increasingly entwined as the insurgency unfolded between 2003 and 2005, was directed at forcing the United States to leave Iraq but also to stop the Shia from inheriting it.[19]

It was left to the insurgency's most extreme element, the Iraqi and foreign fighters gathered around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to erase any doubt in Shia and Sunni minds that the issues on the table were not power-sharing, pluralism, and democracy but which sectarian community would rule over Iraq. Zarqawi put religion front and center in the conflict. In February 2004 he described his view of the conflict in an open letter. Its anti-American tone and its call to jihad were not surprising—they fit in the mold of extremist propaganda and al-Qaeda's communiqués. What was new was what Zarqawi said about the Shia and the sectarian focus of his insurgency. The letter is worth quoting:

> [The Shia are] the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom. We here are entering a battle on two levels. One, evident and open, is with an attacking enemy and patent infidelity. [Another is] a difficult, fierce battle with a crafty enemy who wears the garb of a friend . . . but harbors ill will . . . These are a people who added to their infidelity and augmented their atheism with political cunning and a feverish effort to seize upon the crisis of governance . . . whose features they are trying to draw . . . in cooperation with their hidden allies the Americans.
>
> Their religious and political 'ulama have been able to con-

trol the affairs of their sect, so as not to have the battle between them and the Sunnis become an open sectarian war, because they know that they will not succeed in this way. They know that if a sectarian war was to take place, many in the [Islamic] nation would rise to defend the Sunnis in Iraq . . . Our combat against the Americans is something easy . . . Crusader forces will disappear tomorrow or the day after. The police, which [are] made up of the Shi'i filled out with Sunni agents, is the real danger that we face. They [Shi'is] are more cunning than their Crusader masters . . . As the days pass, their hopes are growing that they will establish a Shi'i state stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and ending in the Cardboard Kingdom of the Gulf . . . Targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies . . . and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans [pagans] . . . Most of the Sunnis are aware of the danger of these people . . . Awaking of the slumbered and rousing of the sleeper also includes neutralizing these [Shi'i] people and pulling out their teeth before the inevitable battle, along with the anticipated incitement of the wrath of the people against the Americans, who brought destruction and were the reason for this miasma.[20]

Zarqawi wove together a number of themes: Sunni political concerns in postwar Iraq, the legacy of Shia-Sunni rivalry over the centuries, the future of Islam and that of Sunnis in Iraq. The rationale for insurgency here thus related the past to the present and tied the theological to the political and antioccupation nation-

alism to anti-Shia sectarianism. Zarqawi evoked the memory of Ibn Taymiya, many of whose anti-Shia fatwas were cited in the letter, and repeated many well-known (as well as forgotten) Sunni polemics against the Shia to drive a theological wedge between the two communities.

For Zarqawi, the aim was to start a civil war. This would not only confound state-building but also weaken the Shia position and force the United States to leave Iraq without a positive political outcome. In September 2005, after U.S. and Iraqi troops launched a major offensive against insurgent forces along the Iraq-Syria border, Zarqawi retaliated with three days of mayhem, during which suicide bombings and assassinations killed and maimed hundreds of Shias, including clerics and government workers. The attacks were followed by a posting on an al-Qaeda–affiliated website that called for a "full-scale war on Shiites all over Iraq, whenever and wherever they are found."[21]

Zarqawi's extremist posture also found reflection in the angry rejection of occupation and Shia empowerment by Iraq's Sunni clerics, especially those who gathered in the more militant and also broadly popular Association of Muslim Clerics (Hay'at al-Ulama al-Muslimin). The association was important in giving the insurgency religious sanction. In particular, some of its leaders, such as Ayyash al-Kubaisi, openly endorsed the insurgency as a legitimate jihad. The association also reflected the sectarian bias of the insurgency's Salafi sentinels. Some of its ulama had maintained ties with Saudi Arabia, from which they received financial and moral support. Some of the association's leaders who had recently returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam, such as its spokesman, Muthanna Harith al-Dhari, who was also an important link between the association and the insurgency, had studied in the kingdom.[22] These ulama favored Hanbali law, associated with Ibn Taymiya and Wahhabism (and thus

a strong anti-Shia posture), over the Hanafi law that has long been the traditional creed of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

The Shia understood the rage and the roots of the violence that was perpetrated against them. As one Shia cleric put it, "The killers of today are the same killers as yesterday."[23] Still, Shia leaders and their flock, victims and bystanders, all repeatedly chose to blame outsiders for the violence against them. It was almost as if there was great fear in identifying neighbors and countrymen as those responsible. But even if this were true, and if the Shia genuinely believed it, then the question would remain: Who were these outsiders? They were Jordanians, Syrians, Egyptians, and most of all Saudis—all Sunni extremists who had come to Iraq to fight Americans and kill Shias. Their national identity would cast them as outsiders to Iraq, but they were still Sunni Arabs. They shared Sunni religious, Arab ethnic, and in some cases even tribal identities with Iraq's Sunni insurgents, and shared in a Salafi ideology that guided their actions.

The notion of insider and outsider had little meaning when broader identities such as Shia and Sunni, Arab and non-Arab were defining the conflict. This point was made clear by Ayatollah Ahmad al-Safi, a close aide of Ayatollah Sistani's and his representative in Karbala. Safi reacted to the Kazemiya stampede by calling on the ulama of al-Azhar in Egypt—symbolizing the Sunni world—to break their "negative" silence and condemn the insurgency, just as he called on Shias to maintain their "positive" silence and refrain from responding in kind to the violence.[24] Other Shia leaders more directly criticized the country's Sunni clerics for not forcefully denouncing the insurgency's anti-Shia violence.

When Zarqawi declared a "full-scale war on Shiites," the association's Abu Bashir al-Tartousi objected, criticizing this brazen call to arms in a tract entitled "About Sectarian War in Iraq."[25] Tartousi

argued that Shia civilians did not bear responsibility for the actions of the Shia-led government or U.S. forces and should not be the object of war. However, he prefaced his criticism by validating the general thrust of Zarqawi's sectarian rhetoric, saying that "although sectarian war in Iraq *may* have been provoked and sparked by the Shia, perceived to be major allies of the occupation forces; and although it is the right of the Muslim mujahid [one who undertakes jihad] to defend himself, his honor, and his cities against the crusader invaders and whoever is allied with them, killing according to sectarian affiliation is not justified by Islamic Law." Tartousi saw the victims as responsible for the violence. The insurgents were justified in their anger at the Shia and should merely refrain from "taking justice into their own hands." It was a matter not of the Shias' guilt—Tartousi took that for granted—but of the kind of justice that they should face and from whom.

Tartousi was also less concerned with the morality of killing Shia civilians than with its implications for the success of the insurgency. He wrote in detail on this theme: "Sectarian war is [in] the crusader's interest, aimed at dividing the efforts of the mujahideen . . . [and] gives grounds for a longer occupation . . . and causes the legitimate Iraqi resistance to lose its credibility in the eyes of the Islamic world." Tartousi's argument was also reflected in the veiled criticism of Zarqawi by Saudi Arabia's most senior cleric, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, who objected to sectarian war because it would "serve the aims of enemies conspiring against Islam."[26] This hardly amounted to the kind of condemnation that the Shia had demanded from Sunni clerics.

Unrepentant, Zarqawi sharply rebuked the Sunni ulama and reiterated his call to war.[27] However, he qualified the "war on Shia" to "war on all collaborators with the occupation."[28] He named a few Shia groups that he would no longer target, including the Sadr

group and its Mahdi Army, which had opposed the occupation. Since Zarqawi had always justified his anti-Shiism in terms of the Shia complicity in fall of the Saddam regime, he was willing to call a truce with those Shias who would join the insurgency or stop working with the government. Although the olive branch to Sadr was important, the truce clearly did not extend to the large number of Shias who voted in the January 2005 elections and continued to support the UIA government and join its security forces. In fact, pronouncements by Zarqawi's supporters named SCIRI, al-Da'wa, and Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress as legitimate targets for attacks, along with Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord Party and the two Kurdish parties that were part of the government.[29] All this hair-splitting between Sunni extremists and Sunni ulama did not amount to a sectarian truce. In fact, it put the burden on Shias to prove that they were not "collaborators," which they could do only by joining the insurgency and succumbing to Sunni domination. Giving the attacks on Shias a nationalist cover thus served as the mantra for sectarian politics in Iraq.

Marc Lynch,
The Arab Uprising:
The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East.
New York: Public Affairs,
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A NEW HOPE

THE WINTER OF 2010 was thus a time when the authoritarian regimes seemed to have regained control after being rattled by the protest wave of the mid-2000s. Many Arab states had faced down significant, creative, and fearless protest movements over the preceding decades, but had emerged unscathed. Activists were scattered and weak, battered by waves of arrests and official pressures, and unable to find points of entry into increasingly repressive regimes. Regimes that had seemed baffled and failing a few years earlier now gave off an air of cockiness, taunting their opposition with stage-managed elections while arresting dissidents with impunity. The American and international agendas were decidedly focused on status quo issues: the interminable Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Iranian nuclear program, and the Obama administration's efforts to move beyond the war on terror with a high-profile outreach to mainstream Muslims.

But this seeming stability masked the deep structural changes in the public sphere that continued to have an effect. The underlying balance of power was shifting relentlessly away from autocratic regimes toward empowered publics. Momentary tactical defeats for specific protest movements could not blunt the overall changes in the public sphere across the Arab world. The ability of regimes to beat down their challengers did nothing to address the unsustainability of the regional status quo or its rejection by the emerging Arab public.

Despite the façade of stability, the foundations of the regimes were eroding dangerously. State services, already in sorry condition, continued to deteriorate. Families struggled with overcrowded, undersupplied,

and poorly administered schools and hospitals. Corrupt and abusive police and indifferent bureaucrats were the primary points of contact between citizens and the state. Rumors of corruption spread relentlessly. (I still remember the first time a taxi driver in Amman began without prompt to rail about Queen Rania's private jet and about who was getting a kickback on a big new construction project in the center of the city. Such public complaint by total strangers, once taboo, had become routine.) Economic woes escalated, the middle class disappeared, the poor scrambled for survival, and youth found all doors closed to them. Sectarian and tribal conflicts broke out unpredictably. Labor strikes intensified and proliferated. A series of deadly disasters in Egypt made this decay all too literal—a rail crash, a capsized ferry, a collapsed apartment building. What could "stability" mean given the palpable decay of the institutional underpinnings of states across much of the region?

This was the context for the uprisings that toppled President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt within the span of two months. Those two seemingly successful revolutions marked a discrete phase in the unfolding Arab upheavals. The success of the Tunisian uprising in forcing the flight of Ben Ali galvanized Egypt and inspired protestors across the region, even though it had taken place at the margins of international attention. It incited Egypt's January 25 rebellion, which riveted global and Arab attention for eighteen days and ended with the removal of Mubarak. The fall of these two long-entrenched autocrats to popular uprisings created a palpable sense that anything was feasible. That sense of inevitable change would begin to fade by March, as authoritarian regimes determined to survive struck back hard. But for those first two months of 2011, fundamental change everywhere in the region seemed not only possible, but unstoppable.

The changes in Tunisia and Egypt were important on their own. But their real revolutionary contribution was their rapid and massive diffusion into a regional tidal wave. The coverage on al-Jazeera and the rapid embrace by social media users across the region brought Tunisia from the periphery to the core of the Arab public debate.[1] On an average Friday in February 2011, virtually every city in the Arab world marched to the same beat, chanting the same slogans, watching each other, and

feeding off a shared energy within a shared narrative. Al-Jazeera became the primary televised home of the revolution both in Arabic and in English. This role would become more openly problematic in later months, but at this point it seemed natural, given its place in shaping the Arab public sphere, promoting a pan-Arab identity, and advocating for political reform over the preceding decade.[2]

Common themes emerged. Friday became a regionwide day of protest, a focal point that could survive any interference with communications or political crackdown. Protestors imitated tactics, such as the seizing and holding of public squares or the uploading of protest videos to YouTube or other Internet sharing sites. Regimes initially dismissed protestors as dangerous mobs, insignificant minorities, and foreign-backed provocateurs, but over time, they usually found themselves confronting genuine challenges. They then faced a daunting "dictator's dilemma": brutality tended to backfire, sparking more protest than it deterred, while protestors tended to dismiss offers of reform out of hand as insufficient or noncredible. Regimes were transfixed by the novelty of the challenge and had not yet developed or deployed the full range of disruption, co-optation, and repression that would come out in force by the middle of February.

The political field within which these protests unfolded was astonishingly unified. The momentum of events traveled quickly and easily across borders. This wasn't only from Egypt and Tunisia: Protestors in Yemen or Morocco hung on every twist in Bahrain, while Syrians eyed the violence that met the Libyan challenge. Protestors developed a very powerful pan-Arabist outlook even as they focused their energies on domestic change—and saw no contradiction between the two. They adopted identical slogans, as *Irhal* [Leave!] or *Al-Shaab Yureed Isqat al-Nizam [The People Want to Overthrow the Regime]* became the lingua franca of Arab society. Terms such as *baltagiya*, an Egyptian term for regime thugs, came into widespread use as far afield as Yemen.

These uprisings may have chanted for democracy, but their energies were not channeled through elections or from established political parties. The authoritarian regimes had largely drained those formal political institutions of meaning through their co-optation of opposition parties, fixing of elections, and pressure on civil society organizations. Protests

were driven by networks of networks, loose coalitions of disparate groups and individuals, instead of by organized movements. The key drivers of protest movements tended to be young, urban, middle-class men and women with experience of the outside world and familiarity with information technology. But the movements could only grow into revolutions where they attracted broad-based support from other social sectors.[3]

The Arab upheavals began in the most marginal of marginal locations, Sidi Bouzid, with the December 17, 2010, self-immolation of the young fruit seller and labor activist Mohammed Bouazizi. This tiny, grim town 200 kilometers from Tunis, lacks even a rail link to the capital. Its long history of labor unrest and violent protest against the regime differed little from other, similar towns and cities across the Tunisian periphery. Tunisia itself lay on the edge of the Arab world, both physically and politically. Its tightly controlled political space and media served at best as a cautionary tale about the extent of the smothering control of Arab authoritarianism. Its workers looked north to Europe for work and opportunities more than to the Arab world, while its regional vista rarely extended beyond North Africa.

Nor were the protests that began in Sidi Bouzid themselves especially unusual. Labor protests, bread riots, and large-scale turbulence had been a regular feature of Tunisian politics for decades. The riots that broke out in December 1983, for instance, look eerily familiar from the vantage point of 2011. Those riots erupted in response to economic grievances, perceived corruption, and official indifference. They quickly spread from town to town, and even across the Maghreb into Algeria and Morocco. They were eventually put down through a combination of force and concessions. But had that been all, those riots would have gone down as just another Tunisian protest movement, another bout of turbulence on the Arab periphery.

By the time Tunisia's protests erupted, growing unrest had been episodically appearing across the region for months. The regionwide explosion did not exactly come out of nowhere. In Jordan, riots and a brutal police response in the southern town of Maan in early January had consumed local attention.[4] In Kuwait, a nasty assault on dissident academic Obaid al-Wasmi roiled national politics.[5] A horrifying attack

on a Coptic church in Alexandria inflamed sectarian tensions in Egypt at the end of December. Algeria had "been in a permanent state of moral revolt against the regime" for years.[6] Political elites in Jordan and Egypt were still fuming over the crudely manipulated national elections in November 2010 that had produced parliaments devoid of any meaningful opposition.

In short, what made January 2011 different was not protest but rather *success* in driving Ben Ali and then Mubarak from their thrones, the *backfiring* of traditionally effective regime responses, the *framing* of multiple local acts of protest into a single coherent regional narrative on al-Jazeera and social media, and the rapid spread of the protest to almost every country in the region.

But the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt also reveal the limits of change. When I walked through Sidi Bouzid in June 2011, I found it hard to believe that the revolts that have reshaped the Arab world had begun in such a remote place . . . and that so little had changed. Sidi Bouzid itself seemed hardly touched, save for the revolutionary graffiti and shrines that remain in the main square on the town's one major road. Across the country, Tunisians continued to complain about the persistence of the old regime, the uncertainty over the depth of political change, the continuing struggles of the economy, the uselessness of political parties jockeying for seats of power while neglecting popular concerns, and rising tensions between Islamists and their secular rivals. Tunisians felt forgotten, losing faith in the democratic transition.

By the summer, Egyptians were even more vocal in their disillusionment. The visceral thrill of Mubarak's fall was soon replaced by growing recognition that existing power structures, particularly the army, had protected the core of their power. A referendum in March on amendments to the constitution passed with 77 percent of the vote, despite being overwhelmingly opposed by the main spokesmen of the revolution.

Activists fumed over continued police abuses and by high-handed military rule, while ordinary Egyptians struggled with a collapsing economy and a perception of spiraling crime and instability. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and of more radical Salafi Islamist movements frightened many activists who saw their secular vision for Egypt under threat by larger, better organized, and more popular Islamist movements

Through the spring, supposedly prodemocracy protestors found themselves in the curious position of demanding the postponement of elections, even as this kept the hated Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in power. By July 8, protestors had reassembled in Tahrir Square to protest the behavior of the ruling SCAF and the appointed interim government. Three weeks later, Islamists responded with a massive demonstration, and security forces cleared away the remnants of the Tahrir sit-in.

The limits to change in Egypt and Tunisia were mirrored at the regional level, as authoritarian regimes fought back in what many activists came to call a "counterrevolution." In this chapter, I focus on the two cases of "success," looking at what allowed these protest movements to emerge, grow, sustain, and succeed. The chapter examines the role of both internal and international factors in shaping the calculations of the leaders and protestors, including a behind-the-scenes view of the rapidly evolving thinking of the Obama administration. It explores the importance of al-Jazeera and of social media in the process, both inside Tunisia and Egypt and beyond their borders. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of change in each case, the ongoing struggle between protestors and interim military regimes over the fate of the revolution. (Chapters 6 and 7 detail the grim battles that followed the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, from Bahrain and Yemen to Libya and Syria to Morocco and Jordan.)

In Egypt, especially, an intense struggle over narratives and legitimacy have defined postrevolutionary politics. The battle has been waged through competing street protests, through the media, and through ongoing debates and discussions across all levels of society. The youth activists who planned the January 25 revolution and fought to occupy Tahrir Square in the early days of the revolution claimed the mantle of revolutionary legitimacy and sought to place themselves above the political fray as its soul and spokesmen. But their narrative was only one of many. The SCAF claimed a decisive role in the revolution by virtue of its decision not to fire on protestors and its move to ease Mubarak from power on February 11. The Muslim Brotherhood claimed a revolutionary role by virtue of its youth activists' early participation and its key role in protecting the square on January 29, as well as its long persecution at the

hands of Mubarak's regime. But others rejected the language of revolutionary legitimacy completely. The revolution, they argued, was made not by the activists, whose meager numbers could never have threatened the regime, but by the millions of ordinary Egyptians who joined the demonstrations and tipped the balance. Legitimacy and power should henceforth be decided not by who was in the square on January 25 but through the ballot box or through control of the streets.

Tunisia's protests began for largely unique and idiosyncratic reasons. The Egyptian revolution almost certainly would not have taken place without the Tunisian example. Without the Egyptian revolution, the cascade of demonstrations and uprisings that swept the region in February and March would likely not have ever begun. How did these uprisings succeed where so many others had failed? Why did they trigger the broader regional cascade?

TUNISIA

The self-immolation of Bouazizi set the Arab uprising in motion.[7] Its efficacy will always stand as a great historical mystery. Tunisia, traditionally on the margins of the Arab world, also had a long tradition of popular uprisings challenging the Tunis government, usually originating in the neglected and marginalized southern cities. Indeed, there had been a very similar outburst of unrest only two years earlier, in 2008, which the regime had quickly managed to subdue.[8] But the protests that erupted in December 2010 dwarfed other recent bouts of unrest.

The regime of President Ben Ali had degenerated into a typical, if extreme, family kleptocracy. The long-whispered excesses and corruption of Ben Ali's wife and her family had recently been revealed through U.S. Embassy cables published by WikiLeaks, but few Tunisians had needed that external confirmation to know of the regime's depravations (though the pet snow tiger detailed in one of the documents was a nice touch). This corruption had a particularly sharp salience in a country of high unemployment, limited opportunities for economic advancement, and sharp disparities between the relatively wealthy coastal areas and the struggling interior. Rage at the corruption and flamboyance of the ruling family, from Jordan's Queen Rania to Egypt's Gamal Mubarak, would be a common theme across many Arab countries in the coming months.

However, few were hated with the intensity with which Tunisians despised Ben Ali's wife.

Youth in particular felt deeply frustrated with the absence of economic opportunity. They chafed at the heavy-handed restrictions on the Internet and the media. In the height of irony, Ben Ali had declared 2010 to be "the year of Tunisian youth," on January 25.[9]

Ben Ali's regime had maintained one of the most severe levels of control over the media and public discourse in the region, a real achievement in an authoritarian Middle East.[10] Stifling censorship of all local media, along with the regime loyalists' ownership of all private media, prevented virtually any meaningful public debate. Foreign journalists were rarely allowed access, and their reporting was tightly controlled. In the few years prior to the 2010 uprising, the regime's intolerance of public dissent and repression of the media had intensified, even as rumors of corruption spread relentlessly through society. As a result, much real political debate and dissent had migrated into cyberspace. The regime responded with intense censorship of the Internet, including not only political sites but even popular video-sharing services and social networking sites.[11] In return, Internet activists such as Nawaat pioneered methods of online anonymity and personal security, and connected local issues into the diaspora community of migrant workers, particularly in France.[12] Facebook, which was seen as a nonthreatening and popular social outlet rather than a political threat, remained unblocked, even as YouTube, Daily Motion, and Flickr succumbed to censorship. As a result, Tunisia soon had one of the highest Facebook membership rates in the world.

The silence of the official media protected the regime from a great deal of potential opposition, but also created a remarkably brittle structure of control. The transformation of the environment for information and communications, both globally and regionally, made the maintenance of such rigid control increasingly implausible. Dependence on such control left the regime uniquely vulnerable to the introduction of new information or new protest movements. Compared to a country like Egypt or Jordan, where critical information flowed freely through the opposition press and protests were a daily occurrence, Tunisia's tightly controlled public sphere made it distinctively vulnerable to a cascade of

dissent once those controls faltered. The very strength of the Tunisian authoritarian state—fierce but brittle—became a weakness once mobilization reached a critical point.[13]

Tunisia was also distinctive in the region for its near-complete decimation of its organized Islamist opposition. Ben Ali had crushed the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot el-Nahda in the early 1990s, driving key figures such as Rached Ghannouchi into exile, imprisoning most of its leaders and many of its cadres. In contrast to most Arab countries, where the Muslim Brotherhood maintained a daunting array of social welfare, religious, and political institutions, Tunisia banished all formal expressions of political Islam. Its Kemalist-style, state-driven secularism and French-style enforcement of the iron line between religion and state set it apart from most other Arab states. The rapid reemergence of el-Nahda following Ben Ali's overthrow suggests that this rigidity, like the censorship of the media, created an unnatural and unstable status quo.[14] It also meant, however, that the mobilization during the revolution itself was uniquely non-Islamist in character and expression.

Bouazizi's act of desperation was not the inarticulate expression of rage that it has been portrayed to be. It was a calculated political act designed to provoke precisely the kind of popular response it achieved. It came in the wake of a series of particularly brazen land grabs in the farmlands surrounding Sidi Bouzid, and attempts by local labor organizations to mount challenges to official abuses. As graphic and horrifying as his self-immolation was, it likely would have had as little impact as previous acts of protest were it not for what would soon become a distinctive combination of factors across the region: a brutal regime response to the protests that broke out, which fueled rather than crushed dissent; the creative use of social media to spread images and reports of the brutality; and an unusually attentive international response once the protests had begun to capture the regional imagination.

Tunisian security forces were quite familiar with outbursts of furious protests in these remote southern towns and cities, and they responded in their traditional fashion. When protestors gathered at Sidi Bouzid's police station, security forces fired into the crowd and sealed off the city by blockading the only roads in and out of the isolated southern cities.

Next, the regime tried hard but unsuccessfully to censor information about the protests.[15] Information Minister Oussama Romdhani imposed a comprehensive ban on any reporting out of the turbulent city. As researcher Rasha Moumneh recalled, "the media blackout is so severe that in the first days of the riots, one Tunisian resident remarked incredulously on Twitter that everyone was lying about the riots, because he had seen nothing of them on TV or in the newspapers."[16]

But neither move proved effective this time. The heavy-handed response, which resulted in several more deaths, infuriated other Tunisians and, instead of dispersing, the crowd grew. The protests quickly spread across Tunisia's southern cities, despite the regime's efforts to isolate Sidi Bouzid. Here, social media, which has often been awarded too much importance in the spread of the Arab uprisings, played a genuinely important role. Tunisia's exceptionally high level of Facebook usage allowed a direct way for activists to spread information about the repression, despite the regime's continuing ability to almost completely control the broadcast media and press. Facebook pages circulated graphic images and information that spread quickly through existing social networks of activists, families, and organized groups.

Al-Jazeera also picked up the story and heavily covered it—perhaps more aggressively than it might have done in another North African country. The relationship between Tunisia and the Qatari TV station had always been difficult, as its fearless coverage clashed with Ben Ali's fierce determination to maintain suffocating control over the flow of information. The al-Jazeera offices in Tunis had routinely been shut down, and in 2006 Tunisia had closed its embassy in Doha, protesting what it called al-Jazeera's "hostile campaign" against it. But over the last two years, al-Jazeera had developed innovative ways to exploit social media and had built strong relationships with many of the online activists who were building an infrastructure of independent communication. When the Tunisian protests broke out, al-Jazeera therefore had both the motive and the means to cover them.

Al-Jazeera framed the Tunisian protest as a pan-Arab event and the fall of Ben Ali as an unmitigated good. The impact was felt not only across the region but also inside the country, as Tunisians could now see themselves protesting on television, feeling their own momentum, and

bridging regional and urban or rural divides. The protests dominated the station's political talk shows for the first few weeks of January, with almost all the guests openly sympathizing with the uprisings.[17] In a December 27 episode of the prime-time lead "Behind the News," Tunisian-born host Mohamed Krishan openly enthused about the massive response to the calls for protests and demonstrations across Tunisia. The popular al-Jazeera host Ali al-Dhafiri began a January 10 program on Tunisia by declaring that "the Tunisian people have broken the wall of fear." On January 15, Al-Jazeera's Open Dialogue program hosted el-Nahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, spokesman for the National Council for Freedoms Suham bin Sidris, and others to discuss the "popular explosion in Tunisia." Host Ghassan Ben Jeddo began the program by reciting a poem by the Tunisian Abu Qasim al-Shabi and then launched a torrent of praise for "free Tunisia" and its glorious message to the Arab world, the Islamic world, and the West.

The regime's standard moves of repression and co-optation failed to contain the protests. In the absence of an organized Islamist movement, other social forces stepped forward to lead the Tunisian protests. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGGT) played a key role, organizing a wide sector of the population. Unions had been organizing protests for years, from the Gafsa miners to underpaid urban teachers. Now they helped move the protests from the periphery to the center of Tunisian politics, organizing solidarity strikes in the major cities and into the capital.

Online political activists also disseminated information, easily sidestepping the military blockades of the roads connecting southern towns. It is easy to mock the cheap activism of changing a Twitter avatar, but it is hard to deny the power of *2 million* Tunisians changing their Facebook profiles to a revolutionary icon on one day.[18] Human rights organizations, lawyers, academics, and journalists stepped forward to join protests and challenge a regime that had for decades kept them on a tight leash. The personal bravery of these individuals cannot be exaggerated, given Ben Ali's harsh treatment of dissidents over the years.

Popular culture also played its part. The previously unknown rapper El General provided the soundtrack to the revolution with a series of incendiary tracks against Ben Ali. His first rap, "Rais el-Blad," led to his

arrest and abuse after he posted it on his Facebook page. Other musicians and artists received less personal acclaim but contributed to the dissemination of revolutionary spirit across society. An overwhelming spirit of youth solidarity pushed across regional and ethnic divides, and soon brought in the older generation, families, and others far beyond the traditional opposition.

Indiscriminate repression also contributed to the spread of a revolutionary spirit through Tunisia. The techniques that had worked in the past against a largely cowed population played out differently when directed against a widely mobilized population. Beatings, arrests, and brutality deployed against ordinary Tunisians touched virtually every family in the country. When these actions were further publicized through the new media that drew from and spoke to all sectors of society, previously passive observers mobilized like never before. Videos and images of police brutalizing unarmed protestors infuriated the previously apolitical and crystallized an entire system of disrespect and shame.

The regional and international environment failed to significantly check the process, as it might have in other circumstances (for example, in Algeria in 1991, Egypt in 2005, or Palestine in 2006). The United States had a working relationship with Ben Ali. It had located the regional office of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in Tunis, ironically locating a democracy-promotion program in one of the region's most repressive countries. But the U.S. did not have a great deal invested in the Tunisian regime and did not play any major role as the upheavals spread. In his January 25, 2011, State of the Union Address, President Obama spoke approvingly of the Tunisian revolution: "And we saw that same desire to be free in Tunisia, where the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator. And tonight, let us be clear: The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people."[19]

Ben Ali's relations with France were closer, and reportedly the French government initially stepped in to offer support to the struggling regime (including a controversial alleged offer to sell riot-police gear). But when these moves were revealed, they were so unpopular that President Nicolas Sarkozy's government backed away. Even the Tunisian regime's

regional allies proved unwilling or unable to help. Ben Ali's key regional friends, including Saudi Arabia, might have preferred that he stay in power but did not move quickly or effectively to help. At this time, the outset of the Arab uprising, nobody quite fathomed the nature of the new threat and still saw the Tunisian convulsions as a local issue. Outside forces would not save Ben Ali.

As the protests spiraled, the red lines governing critical discourse in the public sphere that had cowed Tunisians for decades simply evaporated. Tunisians of all ages and orientations began to unload their long-repressed frustration with Ben Ali and his family.

In early January, al-Jazeera host Krishan published the first of a series of scathing essays in the pan-Arab daily al-Quds al-Arabi declaring that for the first time in a thirty-year journalism career, he had to say what he truly felt about Ben Ali.[20] The real message of Tunisia, argued Krishan, was not that people demanded jobs or food, but that they demanded dignity and an end to corruption and repression.[21] This explicit link between political repression and economic despair lay at the heart of the Arab public's articulation of the revolutions. As the Sudanese intellectual Abd el-Wahhab el-Effendi put it in the same newspaper, "the revolution was required so that the people deserved to have bread in the first place."[22]

Ben Ali certainly did not go without a fight. The endgame in Tunisia rested on the decisions of the independent military, which ultimately decided not to use excessive force against protestors and then moved to push Ben Ali out of power.[23] General Rachid Ammar reportedly infuriated Ben Ali by informing him that his professional military would not shoot at Tunisian citizens. His reluctance may have been due to the unique qualities of Tunisia's military, which was smaller, more professional, and less involved in overt political repression than in most other Arab countries. As the Council on Foreign Relations Middle East scholar Steven Cook has noted, Ben Ali kept military spending low and the military's role circumscribed to prevent a coup against his own rule. This had the unintended effect of making it a less effective tool for repression when the challenge came.

Ben Ali offered a series of political reforms as his problems mounted, but had little credibility or bases of support by then. With the streets

raging, the military neutral, and his allies melting away, Ben Ali had few options. We don't yet know why he chose January 14 to flee the country and seek refuge in Saudi Arabia. Some point to his poor health, others to his hopes to salvage his personal fortune and avoid being put before revolutionary justice. Many bitter Arab leaders complain that he simply lost his nerve and ruined it for everyone else. But it is difficult to imagine how he could have held on any longer. His decision to flee came as a mercy—and set off a paroxysm of celebration across the country the likes of which Tunisia had rarely seen.

The rest of the Arab world shared their joy. "Thank you to the great Tunisian people for proving to the world that the Arab peoples are not dead," declared the Egyptian dissident journalist Ibrahim Eissa the day after Ben Ali fell.[24] But the liberal Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghieh worried that despite the region's excitement, Tunisia "is now testing the question of change in the Arab world: can a corrupt dictator be overthrown without descending into chaos or a new tyranny?"[25] Tunisians understood better than anyone the daunting challenge of building a democracy in a state that had been under exceptionally heavy authoritarian rule for decades.

TUNISIA'S FALLOUT

Even before Ben Ali's fall, almost everyone in the region was consumed with the question of which dictator would be next. The region focused on the events in Tunisia, with almost all opposition movements and activists openly identifying with the its struggle and almost every Arab regime stressing the uniqueness of its situation. All recognized that the real significance of the Tunisian revolution would be determined less by what happened within its borders than by whether it spread beyond them. Egypt's opposition leader Mohamed el-Baradei called the spread of Tunisia's revolution to his own country "inevitable."[26] Saudi columnist and director of the Saudi-owned TV station al-Arabiya, Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, went even further, half-worrying and half-hoping that breaking the psychological barrier against demonstrating raised the specter of a "domino theory" by which even currently calm Arab states might soon be threatened.[27] The sheer bewilderment of the opinion leaders in Arab societies had never been more palpable.

The prevailing consensus among academics, local commentators, and country specialists was that Tunisia's revolution would remain confined to that small North African country. Other countries had good arguments for why they were not like Tunisia: Egypt was larger, Saudi Arabia wealthier, Jordan protected by a monarch and fears of Palestinian takeover, Syria immune thanks to its regionally popular "resistance" foreign policy. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit angrily dismissed claims that Tunisia's revolution might spread to his country as "nonsense." Early on, analysts posited that the Arab monarchies might prove more resilient than the republics, though whether this was due to their greater legitimacy or their greater wealth was unclear.[28]

But these comforting reassurances ignored what was happening on the ground. Across the region, activists and ordinary people were transfixed by events. They were openly asking how they could imitate the Tunisian miracle. And this discussion of the "Tunisia scenario" was everywhere. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood warned that the impending price increases planned by the recently seated new government would lead to an unprecedented explosion like Tunisia's.[29] A Syrian activist tweeted, "Today the world sings [the Tunisian National Anthem] and tomorrow God willing they will sing [the Syrian National Anthem] #Tunisia #Syria."[30]

In the weeks that followed Ben Ali's departure, the rhythm of protest synchronized across the region. Each Friday, when Muslims congregated for prayers, became a "day of rage," while episodic protests throughout the week took turns dominating the regional agenda. Al-Jazeera and other regional media covered all of these protests as a single story. Activists online actively circulated a schedule for national days of protest. One summed up the common itinerary developed online: "Activists are using twitter to line up the dominoes post-Egypt. Yemen Feb 3, Syria Feb 5, Algeria Feb 12—the 'Arab Revolution Timetable.'"[31] And ordinary people, not only these wired activists, could suddenly see an unprecedented hope for change.

The rapid diffusion of the Tunisian experience and the immediate crystallization of a shared narrative across the region are the truly unique contributions of the new media. The new social media were neither necessary nor sufficient for organizing protests. But without them, the

amazing images of Tunisian protestors might never have escaped the blanket repression of the Ben Ali regime. Twitter and Facebook weren't enough, however, as there were simply not enough Arab users of social media for that alone to have made the difference. It was the airing of these videos on al-Jazeera, even after its office had been shuttered early in the revolution, that brought those images to the mass Arab public and even to many Tunisians who might otherwise not have realized what was happening in their country. The claim about al-Jazeera's significance should not be seen as an either-or proposition: al-Jazeera and social media were both part of a comprehensively transformed information environment. Al-Jazeera picked up on and carried the framing of the protests developed online, working with rather than against the social media narrative.

Tunisia's immediate neighbors had traditionally been most affected by past turmoil. Algeria quickly felt the shock waves from Tunisia, though the initial calls for demonstrations on Facebook and elsewhere were not successful.[32] To the west, Moroccan protestors were transfixed but initially were lying low; a first attempt in February to organize national demonstrations failed, with widespread protests only emerging on March 20.

Meanwhile, on January 15, 2011, Libya's longtime ruler Moammar Qaddafi blasted the Tunisian people for "destroying" all of Ben Ali's accomplishments, while caustically mocking the Internet:

> This Internet, which any demented person, any drunk can get drunk and write in, do you believe it? The Internet is like a vacuum cleaner, it can suck anything. Any useless person; any liar; any drunkard; anyone under the influence; anyone high on drugs; can talk on the Internet, and you read what he writes and you believe it. This is talk which is for free. Shall we become the victims of "Facebook" and "Kleenex" [a reference to WikiLeaks] and "YouTube"! Shall we become victims to tools they created so that they can laugh at our moods?"[33]

Qaddafi would soon come to regret his nonchalance. Libyans scheduled their day of protest for February 17, but couldn't wait that long; protests actually broke out the evening of the 16th.

In Jordan, the effects were less dramatic, but the regime still found itself confronted with persistent and real social grievances carried by an unusually wired and discontented young population.[34] In 1989, Jordan had been one of the countries most directly affected by Tunisian riots. Now the government attempted to get ahead of the unrest, preemptively cutting food and fuel prices. Even so, on January 14, leftist groups brought a few hundred protestors into the streets in Amman, Kerak, Irbid, and Zarqa. Two days later, professional associations, which typically led political activism in a country with few significant political parties, brought out thousands. The government wavered between repression and concessions, offering more subsidies while also warning of chaos. By the end of the month, weekend protests had become a standard affair, and on February 1, the king sacked Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai in response to the growing dissent.

Tunisia's effects were felt even in the faraway Gulf, where many eagerly watched the events unfold on television and on their social networks. Many equated their own conditions with those of their fellow Arabs, despite the efforts by Gulf regimes to paint the monarchies as inherently, existentially different from their republican counterparts. Yemeni protestors mobilized around the Tunisian example particularly quickly and enthusiastically, despite being the most geographically distant point in the entire Arab world. After Ben Ali's fall, protestors took to the streets daily, demanding political change. They directly challenged President Ali Abdullah Saleh in extraordinary ways and numbers, explicitly invoking the Tunisian example of change: "The revolution is contagious. Thank you Tunisia for your inspiration," wrote one activist on Twitter.[35] Yemen had one of the lowest levels of Internet penetration in the region, but it did have an experienced and enthusiastic activist base that had been challenging Saleh for half a decade.

The spark caught almost as quickly in Bahrain, where the Tunisian example rekindled a massive protest movement that had been challenging the monarchy for nearly a decade. At its peak, some estimated that more than half the country's population was protesting in the streets. The Bahraini protest movement tried to present itself as a nonsectarian movement for human rights, democracy, and constitutional monarchy. It sought to turn the Pearl Roundabout into the Bahraini equivalent of

Tahrir Square. The regime attempted to brand the challengers instead as an Iranian-backed Shi'a movement and to rally the Sunni minority to its side. Bahrain would become a central battleground of the counterrevolution in March 2011. But in these early days, the enormous outpouring of popular demonstrations in Bahrain offered a powerful example of the demonstration effects from Ben Ali's fall.

Kuwait and Oman joined Bahrain in proving that even wealthy Gulf states were not immune. The always tempestuous Kuwaiti political scene grew even hotter, as an emboldened parliament demanded accountability from the prime minister, directly challenging the prerogatives of the royal family in unprecedented ways. A determined youth movement organized regular protests as well. In Oman, usually off the radar even in the Arab world, a small but determined group of protestors repeatedly took to the streets. Even Iraqis, generally alienated from the mainstream of the Arab world and consumed by their own traumas, found inspiration in Tunis as activists occupied their own fortuitously named Tahrir Square on February 25.

IN ISOLATION, Tunisia's revolution had posed little true challenge to Washington or to the region. But its spread touched on the vital interests of virtually every regional and global player. None could remain neutral in the face of challenges to regimes in strategic countries like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, or Bahrain. Where Tunisia passed without massive international involvement, outside actors would profoundly shape every other revolution. Especially after the fall of Mubarak, the tensions would become even starker and the competitive interventions even more intense.

EGYPT

For all the regional momentum that spread following events in Tunisia, the mass protests of January 25 in Egypt were the pivotal moment that transformed local domestic political struggles into a single, coherent, regional uprising. It was Egypt that took over the international as well as regional agendas and convinced the world that the protests marked something fundamentally new. Egypt has always been at the center of Arab politics—the largest Arab country with more than 80 million citizens, one involved in all regional political issues, and, despite falling on

hard times over the last decades of Mubarak's rule, still an intellectual and cultural leader. If Tunisia defined the periphery of Arab politics, Egypt stood at its core.

By any rational measure, the Egyptian protests should not have succeeded. After Ben Ali fell, the Egyptian regime was fully prepared for what was coming. Its security forces were on alert and deployed, and the Internet was disrupted and al-Jazeera was largely silenced (first due to a still-unexplained decision not to cover the opening hours of the revolution, and then by the Egyptian government's jamming of its signal). Egyptian protest leaders were well known, the timing of the protest was openly advertised, and the likely points of convergence were well protected by legions of security forces. And yet, against the odds, hundreds of thousands of ordinary people poured into the streets, battling the police in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, and elsewhere, and put together one of the largest demonstrations in contemporary Egyptian history.

The differences between Egypt on January 25 and Tunisia on December 17 are as striking as their similarities. Both countries shared the affliction of an aged, corrupt, and increasingly out-of-touch president. Both countries suffered from massive unemployment and underemployment, a frustrated youth population, and a shrinking middle class. But unlike Tunisians, who had struggled against stifling censorship and political repression, Egyptians had been battling against the Mubarak regime for over a decade. Over the 2000s the Kefaya movement, the April 6 Youth Movement, labor movements, judges, civil society organizations, and a wide range of new independent newspapers and critical public figures had arisen to protest against the Mubarak regime's manifold failings. As they planned the protest of January 25, Egyptians therefore faced a different challenge from their Tunisian counterparts—and indeed much of the Arab world.

The real challenge facing the organizers of the January 25 demonstration was not that they would be breaking a taboo against public protest; the challenge was in persuading potential participants that they could succeed. They needed to persuade ordinary people that it was worth the risks and costs to leave their homes and come into the streets against Mubarak. The example of Tunisia was the single most important thing that changed those minds. Tunisia's great contribution was to show

Egyptians that they could actually win . . . and how cathartic that victory could be. Indeed, without the Tunisian inspiration, efforts to organize the January 25th protest almost certainly would have failed just as they had for the last few years.

Believing in the possibility of victory was not easy. Over the course of the previous decade, the Mubarak regime had absorbed every challenge and beaten back every assault. The Kefaya movement had disintegrated. The April 6, 2008, movement had failed to replicate its initial success in galvanizing a mass protest in support of workers. The National Association for Change headed by Nobel Laureate Mohamed el-Baradei had focused attention on the failures of the Egyptian regime and galvanized the politically active youth, but had not crystallized into a coherent political challenge. Egypt in December 2010, for all of its deep and intractable problems, looked to be farther away from immediate revolution than at any time in a decade. Most galling for the Egyptian people, the hated Gamal Mubarak was on the path toward taking his father's place as head of state despite nearly a decade of activism against and public criticism of the prospect.

As important as the Tunisian example was for changing Egyptian minds about participation in protests, significant changes in youth activism had been taking place for some time. In some ways, the wave that would become the January 25th protest began as early as June 2010. Khaled Said, a young man dragged from an Internet café in Alexandria and beaten to death by police, might have been Egypt's Mohammed Bouazizi. After the young Alexandrian died from horrific police abuse, a group of then-anonymous administrators created the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said" to organize protests in his memory, posting graphic photos and updates on his case. The page was the brainchild of Wael Ghoneim, an Egyptian Google employee usually based in Dubai, who worked with several colleagues, including the former Muslim Brotherhood youth activist Abdul Rahman Mansour and human rights activist Ahmed Saleh, to create and maintain it. The page became a major forum for discussion and debate, expanding the circle of activists and the scope of dissent. The organizers experimented with a wide range of creative protests, including silent protests on the Alexandria Corniche while wearing white T-shirts—identifying them to onlookers as some-

how linked, but not a blatant enough political symbol to cause them to be arrested. At least as important as the protests themselves, the Facebook page became a vibrant forum for debate and discussion among a growing sector of the youth. The activists of the April 6 Youth Movement, the remnants of Kefaya, Baradei's National Association for Change, and other groups continued to search for creative ways to organize and protest, building relationships abroad as well as inside the country.

The parliamentary election held from November 28 to December 5, 2010, also contributed to the new environment. In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood had won eighty-eight seats. The party would have won considerably more seats without some blatant regime interventions in the second and third rounds of voting. Since then, Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) had taken no chances. It had put the Muslim Brotherhood under exceptionally intense pressure between 2008 and 2010, with media campaigns, arrests, and moves against their financing, beyond what had occurred since the 1990s. The NDP sought to modernize its own image, while paving the way for Gamal Mubarak to succeed his father as president. It left nothing to chance, tightly controlling the process. Egyptians responded with mass apathy, producing the lowest voting rate in its modern history and a parliament almost entirely devoid of opposition. That process seemed to close the door on institutional politics as a possible vehicle for change.

However, the fait accompli of Gamal Mubarak's succession continued to galvanize unusual levels of popular outrage. The Kefaya movement had in fact begun as a campaign against hereditary succession and had succeeded in making that once-taboo question a central part of the national debate. Egyptians closely identified Gamal with the small group of crony capitalists who had grown wealthy during a decade of neoliberal reforms, even as most found their standards of living deteriorating and the public infrastructure collapsing. And for all the corruption in the system, Egyptians were still proud of their republican system. They bristled at the prospect of Egypt emulating the backward Gulf countries or, for that matter, Syria.

Even the military had little love for Gamal. He was a civilian who had avoided military service and whose neoliberal reforms might someday

threaten their own commercial and industrial empires built through long years of cronyism. Later, one leading member of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) that would eventually succeed Mubarak laughingly told a Washington audience that everyone had known the senior military leadership hated Gamal and had been searching for a way to prevent his rise to power—and that we should "read our WikiLeaks" for proof. But for all that hostility, by December 2010, after the NDP's carefully stage-managed "success" in the election, Gamal seemed to be well on the way to his goal.

The Tunisian protests provided a solution to this problem. At the end of January, ordinary Egyptians watching television suddenly decided to join the activists in a mass push to overthrow the regime. We should recognize that despite retrospective myth making, the protest organizers had no greater expectation of success than the analysts at the time. As they plotted the January 25 demonstrations, Cairo organizers dreamed of perhaps turning out a few thousand people. In Alexandria, organizers debated whether they might muster a better turnout by merging their previously planned demonstration demanding an increase in the minimum wage with the new anti-Mubarak protest. The televised Tunisian miracle is what galvanized Egyptians and convinced them that they too could hope for real change.

This is not to deny the creativity or courage of the activists; indeed, their expectation that they would be only a few facing the wrath of a mobilized security state makes their bravery on January 25 even more impressive. The organizers cleverly distributed false information about the time and location of the protests online to fool state security, and then distributed the real information by SMS (text messages) shortly before the event. They craftily used numerous gathering points from which to converge on Tahrir to prevent the police from bottling them up in any one location. They picked up even more supporters as they marched through the streets, dodging roadblocks and police deployments. Their experience from years of clashes with the police served them well in the opening hours. And they adapted creatively as the unexpected crowds suddenly poured into the streets to converge on obvious focal points like Cairo's Tahrir Square and Alexandria's Corniche. Instead of a few hundred experienced protestors challenging thousands of riot police,

hundreds of thousands swarmed through Cairo's streets toward Tahrir. In Alexandria, nearly a million people quickly moved to the Corniche before swarming police stations and other government buildings.

For all the meticulous planning and despite all the structural preconditions that made revolution in retrospect appear inevitable, nearly everyone was taken by surprise—including the activists. Nobody could have known that so many people would answer the call. Without the Tunisian example, it is extremely unlikely that they would have. How necessary were the activists for making the revolution happen? Would the Tunisian example have been enough for an outraged and frustrated Egyptian population, without the activists to point the way? It is impossible to know.

Mona el-Ghobashy, one of the sharpest academic observers of Egyptian affairs, argues convincingly that the activists had in fact succeeded in reshaping the Egyptian political terrain over the preceding decade. Through seemingly "failed" activism, she argues, a generation of activists had learned how to demonstrate, how to organize, and how to compete with a repressive regime. The political atmosphere was charged, especially after Tunisia, and open discontent could be seen throughout almost all sectors of society. But el-Ghobashy also points out that the key link between the structural problems of the Egyptian regime and the long-delayed revolution was "four continuous days of street fighting, January 25–28, that pitted the people against the police all over the country. That battle transformed a familiar, predictable episode into a revolutionary situation."[36]

This battle was not waged online. On January 26, in one of the most remarkable acts in the short history of the Internet, the Egyptian government almost completely shut off access, nationwide. Vodaphone, the leading SMS and mobile phone service in Egypt, which had close ties to the regime, also shut down its networks. The regime saw the Facebook pages and blogs as an integral part of the protest movement, and clearly expected the shutdown to cripple the communications and organization of their challengers.

The regime was wrong. Once the protest momentum had begun to build, communication and coordination became less essential. Everyone could simply watch al-Jazeera to find out where and when protests were

anticipate the challenge. Security forces were ready. Likely congregation points were heavily guarded, lines of riot police blocked major arteries, and the local media had been placed under tight control. The activists alone could never have hoped to overwhelm the fully deployed security forces. That took the sheer masses of ordinary people in the streets, reinforced by the organized cadres of the labor movement and later the Muslim Brotherhood.

Friday, January 28, was the prototypical Friday "day of rage" that would punctuate politics in the entire region for many months. January 25 had in many ways been only a dress rehearsal for this decisive day. Despite the massive deployment of repressive power and the shutdown of communications, hundreds of thousands responded to the call to protest. The Friday prayer and the centrality of Tahrir Square provided perfect convergence points, reducing the need for coordination. A bout of street fighting enabled the protestors to finally seize and occupy Tahrir Square.

For all the later talk about *silmiyya* (nonviolence), this was a day of violence. Police stations and prisons burned, while protestors savagely attacked police and regime supporters. At the end of that brutal day, the protestors had taken control of Tahrir, and a steady stream of people poured in to reinforce the revolution's newfound home. Later that day, Mubarak made his first televised speech since the revolution had begun, promising a cabinet shuffle and political reforms. Too much had already changed, and his concessions fell flat. Protests continued, and people ignored official curfews.

On January 29, the Muslim Brotherhood officially joined the protests. For the first four days, a large number of individual Brotherhood youth activists had taken part, but the organization itself had held back. Once the Brotherhood threw its weight behind the revolution, however, it provided badly needed manpower, organizational capacity, and experience. Its decision to join was in some ways remarkable, given the deep caution that characterized the Brotherhood's leadership. Most of its politically engaged leaders had been removed from the Guide's Office in controversial 2009 internal elections to the Brotherhood's main leadership body. Its joining the protests openly had many risks, including the potential to frighten the United States, Israel, and other key external

actors and to divide the protestors. While from the activists' viewpoint, the Brotherhood was late to the revolution, a major hurdle had now been crossed. Mubarak's prospects for survival dimmed.

For all the power in the streets, the crucial decision that saved the revolution was the army's. On January 29, the military was deployed after the failure of the hated police to control the crowds. No matter the courage of the protestors, the army could have cleared the square with tanks and helicopters, had it been willing to inflict massive loss of life on peaceful protestors. But, whereas the police and regime thugs had used all the violence in their arsenal, the army early on announced publicly that it would not fire on the Egyptian people. It largely stuck to this vow, which proved to be a wise move. Six months later, Interior Minister Habib el-Adly and Mubarak himself were in court charged with ordering the deadly violence against protestors, while the SCAF ruled revolutionary Egypt.

So many other Arab militaries would make a disastrously different choice in coming weeks. Why did the Egyptian army act the way it did? Part of the reason, not fully appreciated by Egyptians themselves, is that the Obama administration had engaged in near-constant dialogues at all levels up and down the ranks of the Egyptian military, pushing it not to fire, with multiple daily phone calls pressing the case. The SCAF itself highlights its patriotism and deeply rooted self-conception as the defender of the Egyptian nation, not of the Mubarak regime. Because it was a professional military, thoroughly depoliticized so as to avoid coups, it could not be deployed for naked regime-survival purposes. Protestors took the military's open hand gratefully for the most part, though gaps appeared almost immediately between the hard-core activists suspicious of the military's shadowy leaders, and the mass public that favored the military without question. Many of the more politically savvy activists speculated that the move was simply self-interest, to jettison the hated Gamal Mubarak and protect its own corporate interests once it saw Mubarak's fall as inevitable.

Whatever the case, the military's refusal to unleash its arsenal to defend the regime marked a key turning point. The seizure of Tahrir had been enough to force a political crisis but not enough to bring down Mubarak's regime. However, once Mubarak lost the military, the real

focus shifted to the political bargaining and brinksmanship among the protestors, the military, the Mubarak regime, and international actors (primarily the United States).

Having seized Tahrir, the protestors shifted from dynamic marches to a pitched battle to defend the central square against security forces, the *baltagiya*, and the camels that the thugs rode to break the demonstrators' hold on Tahrir. They set up barricades and a tent city, providing basic services, security, and a joint political leadership to keep the revolution focused. Millions of Egyptians passed through the square during these eighteen days to listen, to observe, and to participate in political arguments. All testified to the extraordinary spirit that pervaded the square despite the tension and fear, as people from all walks of life and all political trends joined in a common project of national liberation. The constant circulation of first-time protestors and new participants prevented the Tahrir occupation from degenerating into a narrow clique dominated by the activists, as arguably happened later in the summer. The protestors held Tahrir until Mubarak fell on February 11. Alexandria, for its part, had largely been "liberated" by early February, with most state institutions and police dissolving in the face of the mass protests, leaving the millions along the Corniche little to do but demonstrate in solidarity with Cairo.

The dynamic then shifted to a tense, multilevel bargaining process among Mubarak, the military, the United States, a variety of political parties and self-appointed spokesmen for the revolution, and the determined protestors who had seized the streets. The bids and counterbids of the next eleven days brought pressures from all sides. The power of the street became a crucial variable, as protestors sought to keep the population mobilized, even as negotiations dragged on and the regime tried to divide its opponents while appealing for a return to calm and order. With the military showing self-restraint and the millions in the street declaring that "the army and the people are one hand," the fear of violent repression receded temporarily. But this opened the space for the regime's delaying tactics, attempts to disperse the protestors with promises that it could later break, and efforts to divide the united front in Tahrir.

By this time, Egypt was no longer simply an Arab concern. The whole world, as the cliché goes, was watching. The key external player this time, unlike in Tunisia, was the United States. The Obama administration

was working hard behind the scenes to persuade Mubarak to step down in favor of a transition to democracy. But it encountered great resistance from Mubarak and his advisers, who continued to denigrate the significance of the protestors and to view the Muslim Brotherhood as poised to seize power. This claim did not work with President Obama as it had with President George W. Bush, who had eased his pressure over Egyptian democratization following the success of Islamists in the 2005 elections. Obama had very quickly concluded that the game was up, and that some way must be found to push Egypt toward a real democratic transition, but one that protected core American interests, including the Camp David treaty with Israel, along with the nations' military relationship. A barrage of phone calls to all levels of the Egyptian regime explored possibilities.

Meanwhile, American allies around the region were aghast that Obama seemed to be abandoning America's longtime Egyptian partner. The Saudis were particularly furious at what they saw as Obama's betrayal and urged Mubarak to hang tough. For the first time (though not the last), it became transparently clear that Riyadh and Washington were working at cross-purposes. Other American allies from Amman to Kuwait, Rabat to Sanaa, also watched nervously. If the U.S. would give up on Mubarak so easily, would it stand by them if they faced popular uprisings? Israelis were deeply spooked at the potential loss of their most important friendly regime in the region. Mubarak not only kept their southern border calm but also shared Israeli hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran, actively cooperated in the blockade of Gaza, maintained the supply of natural gas from the Sinai, and managed intra-Palestinian politics. Israelis understood the near-universal hostility among the Egyptian public toward them, and saw little good coming from Mubarak's fall.

Iran soon tried to insert itself into the narrative. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared the uprising to be an "Islamic Awakening" directed against American and Israeli hegemony, but found few takers in an Arab public that remembered all too well Tehran's harsh 2009 crackdown on its own protest movement. Egyptians scoffed at Iran's claims. Tehran would not be a player in this game, a harbinger of its declining relevance in the new politics of the region.

Al-Qaeda faced similar problems. Its message that only violent jihad led by a true Muslim vanguard could bring real change rang hollow with millions of ordinary Egyptians alongside Muslim Brothers in the streets demanding their rights. While al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri no doubt was delighted to see his old nemesis Mubarak on the ropes, and al-Qaeda anticipated a more permissive environment within which to work should his intelligence services crumble, they had no role to play in the unfolding events.

The high-stakes game played out partly in public. On February 1, Mubarak spoke again, offering more substantial concessions than in his first appearance. He offered to step down at the end of his term in September and vowed not to run again. In subsequent interviews, he continued to refuse to step down, but promised to use his remaining time in office to oversee a transition and begin political reforms. He added that Gamal Mubarak would also not stand in elections. With Gamal's succession prospects ended, the main goal of Kefaya had finally been achieved. But now, with the end of Mubarak's regime in sight, the concession was treated as a throwaway and quickly rejected. The people in Tahrir Square heard only vague promises and rambling condescension. Nor did Washington hear the key words it had been seeking. With Obama's prestige now on the line, the only acceptable outcome for the United States would be Mubarak's ouster.

On that same day, President Obama therefore quickly came before the television cameras to warn bluntly that "an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now." While it has become folk wisdom in Egypt and much of the Arab world that America acted slowly and overcautiously during the Egyptian revolution, in fact, the speed with which it acted is truly remarkable. Only *six days* after Egypt's protests began, the United States had unequivocally and publicly called for the president of its closest Arab ally to step down. Privately, it delivered the same messages through multiple channels. But the immediate impact was muted. Mubarak refused to listen, and his inner circle grew more obstinate at the public rebuke. Activists were unaware of the private communications, mistrusted American intentions, and found the words empty when they did not immediately succeed—and in Twitter time, results must be truly immediate.

The next day, February 2, in the infamous "Battle of the Camels," pro-regime thugs launched violent attacks on Tahrir Square with swords and sticks, many of them riding camels from the nearby market. The violence failed to empty Tahrir or to break the spirit of the protestors. Instead, in a dynamic that would characterize the entire region for the coming months, the violence galvanized even more Egyptians to rally to the protestors' side, withdrawing legitimacy from any regime that would inflict such horrors on its own people. And it strengthened the arguments of those outside Egypt who saw a transition as inevitable and Mubarak as a liability rather than an asset.

By now, efforts to find a political solution were escalating from all sides, both international and domestic. On February 3, a self-appointed group of twenty-four "wise men" from the Egyptian political elite presented a plan for political reform—an offer that the regime received coolly and that many of the protestors mistrusted as a potential sellout by an unrepresentative, self-appointed elite. The Obama administration repeated and clarified its message that Mubarak must step down. Privately and publicly, it warned the military that it must avoid using violence against civilians if it hoped to maintain a positive relationship with the United States after Mubarak fell. But nothing seemed to work. America's message was muddied when one-time envoy Frank Wisner told a European television interviewer he believed "that President Mubarak's continued leadership is critical." Even though this was a light year away from current administration thinking, Egyptians still continue to cite his position as evidence of American duplicity.

On February 6, intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, who Mubarak had appointed vice president as part of his belated attempt to meet some of the demands of the protestors, began talks with representatives of the opposition, ostensibly to find a road map toward a political transition. The protestors, who worried that a self-appointed group of representatives would negotiate away the gains of the revolution, found these talks extremely controversial. The factors that contributed to the success of the seizure of Tahrir and mass-mobilization of Egyptian society were less well adapted to navigating this political snake pit. Who could speak for this leaderless assembly, these networks of networks? Who was author-

ized to make specific demands? Who could credibly commit to sending the crowds home if demands were met?

In the end, the very incompetence of the Tahrir leadership likely saved it. The leaderless crowd was unable to agree on anything more than the simple, clear demand that Mubarak must go. It was therefore impossible for anyone to negotiate away the momentum of the revolution. No leadership could effectively respond to the various offers the regime made as it scrambled to survive. The clever gambits to divide and conquer, or to clear the square as a precondition to political negotiations, fell flat in the face of a revolution without a leader. By the time Suleiman offered some serious concessions to a handpicked group of opposition representatives in a carefully staged meeting, nobody in Tahrir was listening. The inconclusive negotiations finally exhausted the patience of the SCAF, and Mubarak dug himself too deeply into a hole by refusing to meet the one core demand of the protestors.

The spirits in Tahrir were low on February 7. The negotiations with Suleiman had cast a pall over the assembled protestors, who could see a long stalemate stretching before them and feared a loss of revolutionary enthusiasm. They were revitalized when the previously anonymous administrator of the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page, Wael Ghoneim, emerged from prison where he had been kept since the revolution broke out. In an interview on Dream TV, he declared, "I am not a hero. I only used the keyboard, the real heroes are the ones on the ground." His appearance galvanized the Egyptian protestors, restoring hope, and—almost as important—gave the protest movement an attractive face for the international media. Months later, Obama reflected, "What I want is for the kids on the street to win and for the Google guy to become president. What I think is that this is going to be long and hard."[38]

On February 10, momentum had built up to the expectation that Mubarak would step down, including, evidently, his own government and the Obama administration. Instead, he refused once again. He offered to delegate some powers to the vice president, but otherwise remained defiant and patronizing toward the protestors.

The collective astonishment, bafflement, and downright rage that gripped not only the Tahrir demonstrators but the entire Arab public at

this moment are hard to exaggerate. The protests escalated across the country and refused to calm throughout the entire next day. Could Mubarak really plan to continue? Could the protests sustain themselves for another week without a collapse into violent anarchy? The SCAF finally stepped in and quietly removed Mubarak from office. He never appeared before his people to deliver this news and never publicly acknowledged his loss of power. Within months, he would be on trial in a closed court, lying in a sickbed in a cage hearing testimony to his perfidy.

THE NARRATIVE I HAVE PRESENTED of the Egyptian revolution is messy by design. There are many key moments, many important actors, and many stories still to be told. The battle to claim revolutionary legitimacy out of this confusing and tumultuous process became a key political battlefield. Should the organizers of January 25 own the subsequent revolution? What about those who took and held Tahrir Square on the 28th and then defended it during the Battle of the Camels? What about the SCAF itself, which made the crucial decisions to refrain from violence and then to remove Mubarak? These questions have far more than academic or historical importance. They were a key terrain of political battle and source of power in the months that followed. Activists constantly invoke their revolutionary legitimacy when they press political demands. So do their adversaries. In late September 2011, I was struck by the sudden appearance of billboards in Cairo calling on Egyptians to "work with the SCAF against the demonstrations which threaten the revolution"—a remarkable claim given that most activists had long since turned against the SCAF as a force for counterrevolution.

Surveys in Egypt and Tunisia after the fall of their dictators revealed an uncertain public trying to make sense of their new environment. Few political parties enjoyed widespread support. While the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and el-Nahda in Tunisia were quickly revealed to be the most popular parties, they rarely commanded more than 20 percent support. Over 50 percent of people in each country described themselves as undecided. Surveys also showed remarkable optimism about the future and support for the revolutions. Surveys in April 2011 by both YouGov and Information Resources found that 9 percent of Egyptians believed

their country was heading in the wrong direction. In April, a Pew survey found that 65 percent of Egyptians were satisfied with conditions in their country, up from 28 percent the year before, and 77 percent were pleased that Mubarak had stepped down.[39] A Gallup Abu Dhabi survey of Egypt released in June, for instance, found 83 percent supporting the revolution. And even as economic conditions deteriorated, Egyptians expressed high hopes for the future; the "wider gap between their assessments of today and their hopes for tomorrow reflect an optimism Egyptians have lacked for several years."[40]

The fall of Mubarak on the heels of Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia created an unprecedented tidal wave of protest and change across the region. The uprising became a truly Arab one, happening simultaneously across virtually the entire region. Young protestors took to the streets wielding the same slogans and the same protest methods used in Egypt. They had real hope that they might actually succeed, and in those delirious moments, their victory indeed seemed almost unstoppable. But within a week of the fall of Mubarak, the Arab uprising was about to take a very different turn in the tiny island kingdom of Bahrain, where the al-Khalifa family had no intention of following the Egyptian president off the throne.

THE TIDAL WAVE

In the week following Mubarak's fall, protestors and governments across the region marveled at what had just happened. In Tunisia, an extreme secularist regime that had imposed exceptionally stifling repressive control over its people for decades had vanished. In Egypt, a decade of protest and challenge had suddenly and shockingly broken the power of a cocky regime that had believed it had regained near-total control over its turbulent population. At that moment, anything seemed possible.

The impact of their example on the region could not have been more direct or clear. A veritable tsunami of protest swept the region as discontented publics took to the streets almost everywhere. All the explanations for why each country was different were quickly washed away by the reality of massive protests explicitly modeled after Tahrir Square in almost every Arab country. The enormity and the simultaneity of the wave of protest that followed Tunisia and Egypt transformed very different local challenges into a unified Arab uprising. The feeling of unity in this shared historical moment demanded action, not applause. The sudden collective empowerment and recognition of possibility that followed the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak drove frustrated and discontented citizens who had never believed in the possibility of change to now seize the opening.

The role of momentum and shared identity cannot be overstated. The Arab protest movements watched, supported, and emulated each other in real time. They identified with each other within a common narrative, one that identified all protestors as the "good guys" and every

regime as the "bad guys." They lived and died together. When one country surged forward, others shared their momentum, and when one suffered a calamitous reversal, the others rallied to their defense. In just one of a million examples, in mid-February, a Yemeni tweeted, "Right now in Freedom Square, Taiz, #Yemen, all the protesters are praying in one voice for saving their brothers n sisters in #Libya."[1]

Political entrepreneurs in many Arab countries sought to emulate Egypt's protest methods, language, and, of course, success. Many chose to adapt Egypt's hashtag, #jan25, to their own countries, by branding their protests with its own identifying label. Each hashtagged date marked a symbolic starting point, although most nations had been experiencing protests of some kind earlier. These Twitter hashtags did not *cause* the revolutions, of course. They played a role in framing each local protest as a chapter in a wider Arab story. The hashtag labels conferred significant power within the dynamics of the new Arab public, raising local conflicts to the attention of the region at large and granting new moral authority to movements that in the past had been one of any number of competing political forces.

The proliferation of hashtagged protests marked a new stage in the Arab uprising. The first two weeks of February were the last time that the Obama administration, or anyone else, could focus on a single clearly defined struggle. During the Egyptian revolution, the regional and international agenda had an exceptionally tight focus on Tahrir Square. After the fall of Mubarak, the lens widened to a disparate set of struggles that, though similar in form, took on dramatically different characters. This phase unfolded in a much less coherent, less unified way than the first phase, with its tight, sequential focus on Tunisia and then Egypt.

The sheer proliferation of crises and protests in this period taxed the ability of the United States—or anyone—to maintain focus. In the White House, national security staff had been in full crisis mode since late January. The new environment did not offer the sort of clear, focused target of attention that the Egyptian revolution had presented. The rapidly escalating war in Libya consumed what oxygen remained. Important arenas such as Yemen or Bahrain simply dropped off the radar of global media or international politics. It became perhaps too easy for

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Washington to leave Yemen to the GCC and the counterterrorism bureaus, while quietly acceding to Saudi demands in Bahrain.

The narrative of the hashtagged Arab uprisings could at times be misleading, in potentially dangerous ways. The comparison to Egypt and Tunisia exaggerated the real prospects for victory, which could lead hopeful but naive protestors to their deaths, provoke panicked regimes to crack down harder than necessary, or cause onlookers to misread the true nature of opposition movements. Consider, for instance, how we may have been misled by the presentation of a Syrian protest movement that was in fact very small, isolated, and largely directed from abroad as a chapter within the unfolding Arab narrative. Did their placement within the Arab uprising narrative lead external observers to make unwarranted assumptions about its prospects for success, its ideology, or its political aspirations? Did it cause Bashar al-Assad and his regime to exaggerate the threat it posed and thus employ unnecessarily brutal repressive force that turned the Syrian uprising into a self-fulfilling prophecy?

This chapter traces the progress of the second phase of the Arab uprising through the succession of Fridays, the days of rage, as the regional agenda fragmented, the course of the struggles diverged, and confusion reigned. The upsurge from below had common characteristics, but the outcomes diverged widely from country to country. Some protests quickly faded; others consumed media attention and caught fire. Some regimes sought to deflect challengers with preemptive reforms, while others took a hard line and struck back with violence. Each regime made different calculations as to whether the long-term costs of repression outweighed the immediate benefits of breaking the momentum of public challenges.

The wave of ferment may have seemed unstoppable, but seasoned observers of Arab politics knew from the start that the authoritarian status quo would not go easily. Leaders learned from the failures of their counterparts and resolved not to repeat one another's mistakes. The great powers of the region quickly sought to exploit the new opportunities, defending their own interests while seeking to expand their influence where possible. The GCC countries came together to act in an unusually coordinated fashion, after long years of being divided and

contentious, to crush dissent in Bahrain and prevent its emergence elsewhere on their home turf. They took the offensive outside their usual sphere of influence, particularly in Syria and in Libya (where Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah had a long-standing grudge against Qaddafi over a reported Libyan-sponsored assassination attempt, and Qatar's emir still resented Qaddafi's grandstanding that had wrecked a Doha Arab Summit meeting). The tentative rapprochement between the two long-feuding Gulf powers, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, would not likely last, but it did hold for long crucial months during the Arab uprising.

The second phase of the Arab uprising therefore passed from the heady rush of regional momentum in February to a more fragmented, contentious crawl. The GCC's intervention in Bahrain and the NATO intervention in Libya, both in mid-March, marked the pivot from the second to the third discrete phase of the Arab uprising. Chapter 6 tells the story of this counterrevolution. But before turning to that shift, it is worth going into some depth about the early moments of enthusiasm and collective movement that defined the first months of 2011—when very similar and deeply interconnected popular uprisings appeared at the same time, but met very different fates.

HASHTAG PROTESTS

The assigning of protest hashtag dates started as something of a joke on Twitter, on a par with the "Arab Dictators Survival Manual."[2] I do not mean to assign too much power to the hashtags, or indeed to Twitter, the importance of which to the organization and influence of protests is often grossly exaggerated. My intent here is more limited: to demonstrate the importance of the process by which distinct national protests merged into a single, coherent, and almost universally shared narrative of region-wide uprising.

This unified political narrative demands far more explanation than is usually offered. It is not intuitively obvious that Tunisia's revolutions should matter to Yemenis: The two countries have virtually no economic, social, or political interaction, have different political institutions and histories, face very different political challenges, and even speak very different colloquial forms of Arabic. Nor is it obvious that Bahrain's protests should have been accepted as equivalent to other Arab protest